



INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM & HUMAN RIGHTS

COUNTRY FACTSHEETS

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AFGHANISTAN



USCIRF [recommends](#) that the United States Department of State place Afghanistan on its Special Watch List with regards to religious freedom violations, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Afghanistan the second most dangerous nation in the world for Christians. The 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan [designates](#) Islam as the national religion, but stipulates that "followers of other faiths shall be free within the bounds of law in the exercise and performance of their religious rituals. Article 3 states that "no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam" and Article 17 asserts that national educational

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Afghanistan to abolish all blasphemy and apostasy laws and other constitutional provisions that stipulate harsh punishments including the death penalty for apostasy charges.
- Encourage Afghanistan to take steps to increase the security of religious minority communities vulnerable to terrorist activity or other violent attacks on account of their faith and spiritual beliefs.

curriculum be focused on "the tenets of the sacred religion of Islam." Most importantly, Article 130 states that if there exist no constitutional provisions applicable to a court case, courts are required to rule in line with Hanafi jurisprudence (Sunni Islam rule of law). Under Hanafi jurisprudence, blasphemy and apostasy are both hudud crimes (offences against God). Crimes of blasphemy are [penalized](#) via ta'zir (discretion of the judge); on the contrary, crimes of apostasy are punished by the death penalty if the charged individual does not immediately recant. Moreover, [according to](#) the US State Department, individuals charged with apostasy may "possibly face death by stoning, deprivation of all property and possessions, and/or the invalidation of their marriages." It is worth noting, however, that prosecutions of apostasy are rare. The most notable case in which an Afghan man by the name

of Abdul Rahman who, after converting from Islam to Christianity, was [arrested](#) in 2006 and tried on charges of apostasy. Prosecutors, specifically Abdul Wasi, had urged the courts to rule the death penalty in accordance with Article 130 of the Constitution; reports even circulated that the Afghan Attorney General had [agreed](#) that Rahman should be hanged for apostasy. Rahman was eventually released and his charges dropped on account that he was found mentally unfit to stand trial.

USCIRF highlights that the major obstacles to religious freedom in Afghanistan include terrorist activity by the Taliban and by the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), both of which target Shi'a Muslim communities in particular. In October 2019, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) found that approximately 8,000 civilian casualties in that year had been the result of terrorist attacks by non-state actors. Despite much-needed and much-welcomed efforts on part of the Afghan government to improve the security of vulnerable communities, many Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Baha'i individuals reported feeling fearful of practicing their beliefs without aggressive retaliation by terrorist groups. USCIRF reports that due to government involvement, however, there have been fewer reported terrorist attacks on Shi'a Muslim festivals and celebrations.

AFGHANISTAN



Resources on Afghanistan:

- Humanists International, *The Freedom of Thought Report: Afghanistan*, 2019, [blob:https://fot.humanists.international/929ad276-8634-40dc-aad3-ff930f32b07f](https://fot.humanists.international/929ad276-8634-40dc-aad3-ff930f32b07f)
- Freedom House, *Afghanistan*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/afghanistan/freedom-world/2020>
- The All-Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, *Afghanistan*, <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/afghanistan/>
- Open Doors, *Afghanistan: Country Dossier*, 2020, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Afghanistan-WWL-2021-Country-dossier.pdf>

ALGERIA



USCIRF [recommends](#) that the United States Department of State place Algeria on its Special Watch List with regards to countries that are undergoing increasing religious persecution and repression. Open Doors [ranks](#) Algeria as the 17th most dangerous nation for Christians. The Constitution of Algeria [states](#) in Article 2 that Islam is the official national religion but appears to offer religious freedom in Article 42 which states that "freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion shall be inviolable" and that "freedom of worship shall be guaranteed in compliance with the law." Despite this provision, the Penal Code [includes](#) problematic blasphemy laws.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Algeria to abolish all blasphemy laws and other provisions criminalizing peaceful proselytism.
- Encourage Algeria to cease all practices of raiding and shutting down Protestant churches and engaging in aggression towards worshippers.
- Encourage Algeria to stop persecuting and arbitrarily arresting non-Sunni Muslims for their religious beliefs and practices.

Article 144 posits imprisonment of 3 to 5 years as well as a hefty fine for "any individual who insults the prophet and the messengers of God, or denigrates the creed or prophets of Islam through writing, drawing, declaration, or any other means." While the government appears to promote religious charitable work, proselytism by non-Muslim religious communities is illegal, and therefore community engagement can be seen as proselytism.

The government of Algeria has been known to target the Evangelical Protestant communities for violation of the freedom to worship. In October 2019, government authorities raided and forcibly [shut down](#) three of the nation's largest Protestant churches on account of the fact that they failed to re-apply for legal registration. Many of these local branches of the Protestant Church have been

to re-apply due to 'lack of confidence in the process' or fears that they will be ultimately denied and subsequently shut down. One of the terminated churches, Full Gospel located in Tizi Ouzou, [posted a video](#) on their social media accounts in which police are interrupting worship and aggressively forcing attendees out of the building. In one case, Pastor Salah Chalah, leader of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), [was assaulted](#) by authorities as he was forced into closing his church.

Non-Sunni Muslim groups, predominantly the Shi'a, Ibadi, and Ahmadi Muslim communities, have also been repeatedly persecuted for its divergence from the state-approved Sunni theology. [According to](#) the State Department, Ahmadi leaders reported that by the end of 2019, there were no fewer than 286 cases of Ahmadi individuals being arbitrarily detained on charges including "operating an unregistered religious association, collecting funds without authorization, and holding prayers in unauthorized locations." Some of the detained Ahmadi Muslims even had their passports, school degrees, and other important documents confiscated. In May 2019, member of the Mozabite Ibadi Muslim community and noteworthy human rights advocate Kamel Eddine Fekhar [died](#) as a result of a 60-day hunger strike he participated in while he was detained for his condemnation of the government's discrimination against minority groups. At the behest of the international community, the Ministry of Justice opened an investigation into his death; however, no information on his case has been released.

ALGERIA



Resources on Algeria:

- Religious Freedom Institute Cornerstone Forum, Claire Evans, *Algeria's Opportunity for Freedom*, 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57052f155559869b68a4f0e6/t/5f21c388e0a31b5f652029ef/1596048264266/Cornerstone+Forum+%7C+No.+279+%7C+Evans+%7C+Algeria%27s+Opportunity+for+Freedom.pdf>
- International Christian Concern, *Brief: Religious Freedom in Algeria*, 2020, https://www.persecution.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/brief_irf_algeria_0420oct.pdf
- Human Rights Watch, "Algeria: Crackdown on Protestant Faith", October 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/24/algeria-crackdown-protestant-faith>
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Conversation with USCIRF: Religious Freedom in Algeria*, November 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxLJ5cJYSek>

CHINA



USCIRF [recommends](#) China be designated as a Country of Particular Concern with regards to its violations of religious freedom, and Open Doors [ranks](#) China the 27th most dangerous nation for Christians. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China [grants](#) citizens the right to freedom of religion or belief, and the Criminal Law of China penalizes obstructions of such rights. However, for years religious communities have suffered harsh persecution which has only escalated since the [introduction of](#) the 2018 Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage China to amend or abolish the 2018 Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs
- Encourage China to abolish its practice of predictively policing, arbitrarily arresting, and torturing Uyghurs and other religious minorities and spiritual adherents.
- Sanction Chinese individuals and entities responsible for persecution of Uyghurs
- Encourage China to cease its practice of forcibly obtaining organs from Falun Gong practitioners

These Regulations pose serious threats to religious freedom by (1) taking away self-determination of religious organizations and communities and instead requiring religious activities to be inspected by governmental religious affairs departments; (2) prohibiting and criminalizing religious worship, activities, and education taking place outside of government-approved centers; (4) placing exorbitant restrictions on religious publications and receiving charity donations; (5) proscription of worship and church attendance to minors under the age of 18; (6) requiring government approval for missionary work and religious trips; as well as many more restrictions. Some of the most persecuted religious minority communities in China include Christians, Uyghurs, Tibetan Buddhists, and Falun Gong practitioners. It is important to note that children among these

communities face unlawful infringement of their freedoms as individual rights holders to live according to their faith or spiritual beliefs despite that China is a [signatory to](#) the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Since 2017, China has [engaged in](#) a campaign to arbitrarily detain peaceful Uyghurs in internment camps on account of their religious and ethnic background. Among the rights violations Uyghurs face in prison are sinicization of religion, physical abuse, 24/7 surveillance, sleep deprivation, forced abortion and sterilization, sexual abuse, and forced labor. In 2020, the US State Department [designated](#) China's persecution of the Uyghurs as genocide.

In 2019, the China Tribunal [confirmed](#) "beyond doubt" that China is carrying out forced organ harvesting on unwilling Falun Gong practitioners, many of whom are arbitrarily detained for their beliefs. Since the turn of the millennium, human rights advocates have noticed that the supply of readily available organs in China was suspiciously high, and that the rise in organ transplants in China preceded the establishment of the voluntary organ donation system.

Tibetan Buddhism has faced increasing persecution since 2008, including government monitoring of monasteries and convents, the erasure of Tibetan language from school curriculums, and a 2018 government-issued notice [criminalizing](#) acts such as protesting the Chinese government's policies in Tibet, advocating for Tibetan language preservation, and conducting and participating in Tibetan Buddhism-centered religious education.

CHINA



Resources on China:

- International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, *China Cables*:
 - Scilla Alecci, "How China Targets Uighurs 'One by One' for Using a Mobile App", 2019, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/how-china-targets-uighurs-one-by-one-for-using-a-mobile-app/>
 - ICIJ, "Read the China Cables Documents, 2019, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/read-the-china-cables-documents/>
- Australian Strategic Policy Institute:
 - *The Xinjiang Data Project*, <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/>
 - *Uyghurs for sale: 'Re-education', forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang*, 2020, <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2021-01/Uyghurs%20for%20sale%2011%20January%202021.pdf?QPHeTkLC40K7VGCvvOFnmlPGc1nIr4pf>
- Adrian Zenz
 - *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP's Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang*, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Zenz-Internment-Sterilizations-and-IUDs-UPDATED-July-21-Rev2.pdf?x68072>
 - *Break Their Roots: Evidence for China's Parent-Child Separation Campaign in Xinjiang*, Journal of Political Risk, 2019, http://www.jpolrisk.com/break-their-roots-evidence-for-chinas-parent-child-separation-campaign-in-xinjiang/#_ftn1
- Campaign for Uyghurs, *China's Genocide in East Turkistan*, <https://campaignforuyghurs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Genocide-Report-English-1.pdf>
- Free Tibet & Tibet Watch, *Growing up under China's occupation: the plight of Tibet's children*, https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/ngos/FreeTibet_TibetWatch_China.pdf
- The New York Times, *The Xinjiang Papers ['Absolutely No Mercy': Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims]*, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>
- BBC News, "'Their goal is to destroy everyone': Uighur camp detainees allege systematic rape", February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55794071>

CUBA



USCIRF [recommends](#) that the State Department place Cuba on its Special Watch List with regards to its religious freedom violations that have increased over the past few years. Article 15 of Cuba's newly-adopted 2019 Constitution [informs](#) that "the State recognizes, respects, and guarantees religious liberty" and prohibits all acts of discrimination based on religion or belief. However, multiple human rights and religious organizations have reported facing severe persecution, including hundreds of travel restrictions, violations of the freedom of religion or belief, harassment, and arbitrary detention. This persecution has been reported to be at the

hands of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP), the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the latter two of which have repeatedly denied registration to religious communities or otherwise unjustly prolonged the application and registration process.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Cuba to cease the practice of repeatedly denying official registration to religious communities.
- Encourage Cuba to stop targeting for arrest and imprisonment religious leaders and journalists who are involved in political freedom advocacy and minority rights activism.
- Encourage Cuba to eliminate all undue travel restrictions imposed on religious leaders.

Cuban authorities throughout the past two years have specifically targeted religious leaders, especially those that are doubly involved in political freedom advocacy and social work. Christian minority rights [activist](#) Mitzael Diaz Paseiro, Apostolic Movement member and [journalist](#) Ricardo Fernandez Izaguirre, [Pastor](#) Alain Toledano, [Pastor](#) Ramón Rigal, and tens of other notable leaders have been harassed, interrogated, or detained for their work. According to USCIRF, as of November 2019, approximately 20 religious leaders - from various communities -

have been prohibited from leaving Cuba for their work. Rather than targeting some religious communities over others, cracks down on virtually all religious groups and movements, including the Apostolic Movement, the Sephardic Bnei Anusim community, the Roman Catholic Church, orthodox Christians, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Multiple members of the Cuban Evangelical Alliance (CEA) were prohibited from traveling to the United States to attend the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. Moreover, journalists have been similarly targeted for detention and accused of being "counterrevolutionaries."

Similar to the obstacles that make it difficult for religious communities to register with the nation, religious buildings and houses of worship have also been targeted for penalties and unwarranted visits by authorities for their failure to meet exorbitant and ridiculous requirements. An example of such rules is a 2005 law which [prohibits](#) two houses of worship of the same religious community to be within two kilometers of each other. For communities seeking initial construction permits or permission to renovate, the Office of Religious Affairs often denies applications. USCIRF reports that "these restrictions, coupled with the growth in faith communities, have severely limited the right of many Cubans to worship in a community." In April 2019, the ORA rescinded the Maranatha Baptist Church's permit to construct a new church, however, the CCP reversed this decision six months later.

CUBA



Resources on Cuba:

- Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *Freedom of Religion or Belief in Cuba*, 2020, <https://docs-eu.livesiteadmin.com/dc3e323f-351c-4172-800e-4e02848abf80/2020-01-cuba-report.pdf>
- Baptist Press, "Cuba's proposed constitution cuts religious freedom, February 2019, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/cubas-proposed-constitution-cuts-religious-freedom/>
- 21 Wilberforce, "Cuba: Still the Western Hemisphere's Worst Abuser of Religious Freedom", <https://21wilberforce.org/cuba-still-the-western-hemispheres-worst-abuser-of-religious-freedom/>
- UK MP David Anderson, UPDATE: Religious Freedom in Cuba, November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5NPVBeE1dU&feature=youtu.be>

EGYPT



USCIRF [recommends](#) that the State Department place Egypt on its Special Watch List with regards to its religious freedom violations, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Egypt the 16th most dangerous nation in the world to be a Christian. The 2014 Constitution of Egypt [designates](#) Islam as the official national religion and states that "the principles of Islamic Sharia are the principle source of legislation." Article 3 states that "the principles of the laws of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of laws regulating their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders." Article 64 asserts that "freedom of belief is absolute"

and that freedom to practice one's faith and religious traditions is a right specifically to "followers of revealed religions." Despite constitutional provisions which appear to protect religious freedom, religious minority communities - especially Christian groups - face obstacles in registering places of worship, building new churches, and even organizing social and community work. USCIRF also reports that there have been a few noteworthy incidents of religiously-motivated violence against Christians, such as an [attack](#) by radical Muslims on a local Coptic Orthodox church in Naga al-Ghafir, during which assailants physically assaulted worshippers and shouted anti-Christian inflammatory slogans. As a result of the confrontation, authorities shut down the church, adding it to the list of 25 churches that have been [shut down](#) since 2016. Open Doors highlights the case of Coptic Christian activist Ramy Kamel who is recognized for his advocacy for Coptic minority rights and

who was arbitrarily arrested in November 2019 on false charges of joining a terrorist group and spreading misinformation. Kamel, a member of the Maspero Youth Union, has for years exposed the violations of Coptic Christians' rights to freedom of religion or belief, and since his arrest has [remained](#) in detention for over a year without a formal trial. Also notable is that in 2020, five Egyptian Christians [were arrested](#) on charges of blasphemy and "insulting religion", and other individuals charged with blasphemy have remained in prison longer than their sentences.

Another issue that remains prevalent in Egypt is the abduction and forced religious conversion of Christian and minority women and girls. In April 2020, 39-year-old Christian woman Ranya Abd al-Masih disappeared; days later, she appeared in a video in which she stated, while crying, that she had converted to Islam and that she no longer wished to be in contact with her husband or children. Her husband has stated that he believes she was coerced to convert, as she had been regularly attending church and praying not long before her disappearance. Ranya was eventually [released and reunited](#) with her family in July, and she has stated she remains a "servant of Christ." In October 2020, 20-year-old Christian woman Magda Mansur Ibrahim [disappeared](#) on her way to college and reappeared in video days later claiming she had converted to Islam. Her parents believe she was abducted and converted against her will.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Egypt to eliminate all superfluous obstacles to registering churches and building houses of worship.
- Encourage Egypt to take steps to combat the abduction and forced conversion of religious minority women and girls.
- Encourage Egypt to cease its practices of arbitrarily arresting individuals on charges of blasphemy, and to release all prisoners of conscience.
- Cosponsor [H. Res 117](#) supporting Coptic Christians in Egypt.

EGYPT



Resources on Egypt:

- Christian Headlines, "Christians, Others in Egypt Arrested for 'Insulting Islam'", November 2020, <https://www.christianheadlines.com/blog/christians-others-in-egypt-arrested-for-insulting-islam.html>
- International Christian Concern, "Egypt Acquits Men Who Assaulted Christian Woman", December 2020, <https://www.persecution.org/2020/12/18/egypt-acquits-men-assaulted-christian-woman/>
- Coptic Solidarity, "Forced Conversion to Islam: Missing Coptic Woman Reappears and Remains 'Servant of Christ'", July 2020, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2020/07/31/forced-conversion-to-islam-missing-coptic-woman-reappears-and-remains-servant-of-christ/>
- Coptic Solidarity, "Another Missing Coptic Girl Reappears as 'Willing' Convert to Islam in Video", October 2020, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2020/10/12/another-missing-coptic-girl-reappears-as-willing-convert-to-islam-in-video/>

ERITREA



USCIRF [recommends](#) Eritrea be designated as a Country of Particular Concern, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Eritrea the 7th most dangerous nation for Christians. Eritrea's constitution [stipulates](#) that "every person shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief" and that "every person shall have the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice." However, the government only recognizes four official religions: Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholicism, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Other religious minority communities are denied licenses to operate churches and houses of worship, and even

individuals belonging to one of the four state-approved religions have faced persecution and unlawful involvement by the government.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Eritrea to release unconditionally and with immediate effect the elderly Patriarch Abune Antonios.
- Encourage Eritrea to cease its practice of arbitrarily shutting down Catholic-run schools, hospitals, and churches. The work of Catholic clinics in Eritrea would be doubly essential in providing accessible and affordable care to Eritreans during the pandemic.
- Urge US Immigration and Customs Enforcement to cease deportations of Eritreans in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention principle on non-refoulement

In 2007, Patriarch Abune Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox Tawahedo Church was forcibly [removed](#) from his position by national authorities in 2006. Patriarch Antonios was well known for his criticism of the government's involvement in church affairs as well as for his condemnation of the government's mass excommunication of church members and arbitrary detention of priests. In 2007, the government replaced Patriarch Antonios with a patriarch chosen by the government rather than the church. Patriarch Antonios is being kept at an undisclosed location and the last time he was seen in public was July 2017, when he was prevented from giving a speech at St. Mary's Cathedral in the nation's capital. Members of the Eritrean Christian community - many of whom are

also members of the Tawahedo Church - still recognize Patriarch Antonios as the legitimate leader rather than that who was chosen by the government, and members have advocated for Patriarch Antonios' release especially due to his old age of 93 years. In October 2020, a photo was [circulated](#) showing Patriarch Antonios enjoying his 'permitted outdoors time' where he is detained.

Members of unregistered religious groups and churches have faced arbitrary and prolonged detention, and from May to August 2019, some 300 individuals [were arrested](#) without formal charges or publicly released information regarding their status or whereabouts. Catholic and Christian schools, health clinics, and churches have been closed or demolished by government officials despite that these services offer greater accessibility for poor and rural Eritrean citizens than government-run services. At least 52 Jehovah's Witnesses have also been imprisoned for their faith, as well as peaceful political protestors. Various NGOs have reported that the Eritrean government has imprisoned approximately 340 church leaders, and between 800 and 1,000 laypeople. It is worth noting, however, that during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Eritrean government has on numerous occasions [released](#) handfuls of religious and other prisoners of conscience due to the increased vulnerabilities to COVID experienced by those in detention centers.

ERITREA



Resources on Eritrea:

- Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *General Briefing: Eritrea*, 2020, <https://docs-eu.livesiteadmin.com/dc3e323f-351c-4172-800e-4e02848abf80/eritrea---may-2020.pdf>
- Human Rights Council, *Letter to 41st Session of the UN Human Rights Council on Eritrea: Ensure Continued Scrutiny of the Human Rights Situation in Eritrea*, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/12/letter-41st-session-un-human-rights-council-eritrea>
- Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Defending Freedoms Project, *Patriarch Abune Antonios*, <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/defending-freedom-project/prisoners-by-country/Eritrea/Patriarch%20Abune%20Antonios>

INDIA



USCIRF [recommends](#) India be designated a Country of Particular Concern, and Open Doors [ranks](#) India the 10th most dangerous country for Christians. The Constitution of India [grants](#) citizens the right to "freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion" and prohibits discrimination on the basis of faith. However, Chapter XV of the Indian Penal Code [criminalizes](#) and stipulates harsh sentences for individuals who "insult" anyone's religion. These blasphemy laws have been used to detain and imprison religious minorities and political activists under often-false accusations of blasphemy. The majority of India's states

have enacted their own legislation criminalizing the slaughter of cows, and have applied these laws to non-Hindus including religious minorities and Dalits, who should not be obligated to follow laws derived from Hindu theology. Moreover, 10 Indian states have introduced laws prohibiting the use of force or enticement to convert another's religion; however, these laws are in reality used to terminate and [question](#) legitimate religious conversions and interfaith marriages that show no signs of being coerced or induced. Mainly Muslims and Christians are [arrested](#) under these laws in attempts to prevent willing religious conversion away from Hinduism.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage India to repeal the Penal Code's problematic and unjust blasphemy laws. Similarly encourage Indian states to abolish the discriminatory and persecutory cow-slaughter laws and anti-conversion laws.
- Encourage India to abolish the Citizenship Amendment Act and similarly dissolve the National Register of Citizens.
- Encourage India to outwardly condemn and take measures to eradicate violence against religious minority communities.

In 2019, the Prime Minister Modi's BJP-led administration implemented the [problematic](#) Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which

preferentially provides non-Muslim migrants an expedited naturalization process and concurrently presents obstacles to Muslims attempting to obtain citizenship. The government also established the National Register for Citizens (NRC) to facilitate distinguishing between natural-born and naturalized citizens from illegal migrants. In 2019, a group of various UN Special Rapporteurs released a statement [explaining](#) that "this process may exacerbate the xenophobic climate while fuelling religious intolerance and discrimination in the country."

Targeted violence against religious minorities - in particular girls of Christian faith or Dalit background - has substantially risen throughout the past few years. According to Amnesty International, during 2019 alone, "over two-third of the victims [of Hindu nationalist extremists] suffered harm on account of their Dalit identity followed by their Muslim (40), Adivasi (12), [and] Christian (4) [identities]...." In July 2020, Indian Christian Pastor Balvinder Bhatti was beaten and [killed](#) just years after the murder of his brother, also a Christian. Also in July 2020, the murder of 25-year-old Christian convert woman Suman Munda [marked](#) the sixth death of an Indian Christian in just three months. In September 2020, the gang rape and subsequent death of a 19-year-old Dalit woman by four upper-caste men [sparked](#) protests throughout the nation which called for justice and an end to rape culture. This incident followed swiftly after the August 2020 rape and [murder](#) of a 13-year-old Dalit girl in Uttar Pradesh, and the December 2019 [murder](#) of a 23-year-old Dalit girl who was set on fire after she attempted to press charges on her rapists.

INDIA



Resources on India:

- Jubilee Campaign, *Written Statement: Persecution of Religious Minorities in the Republic of India*, 2020, <http://jubileecampaign.org/written-statement-persecution-of-religious-minorities-in-india/>
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2020 Annual Report, 2020, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf
- BBC News, "India rejects scathing US religious freedom report as 'biased'", April 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52467564>
- Evangelical Fellowship of India Religious Liberty Commission, *1-15 January 2021*, <https://efionline.org/2021/01/20/rlc-persecution-watch/>

IRAN



USCIRF [recommends](#) that Iran be designated a Country of Particular Concern, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Iran the 9th most dangerous country in the world for Christians. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran [states](#) that "the official religion of Iran is Islam" and "this principle shall remain eternally unchangeable." "Other Islamic schools of thought...are deserving of total respect and their followers are free to perform their own religious practices." Moreover, the Constitution appears to protect the religious freedoms of a few recognized minority groups: "Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are considered the only recognized religious

minorities. They may exercise their religious ceremonies within the limits of the law. They are free to exercise matters of personal status and religious education and they follow their own rituals." While the structure of the government allows for five out of the 290 seats in the Majlis to be [reserved](#) for recognized religious minorities, there is in practice no guarantee of a freedom to practice and share one's religion and the state puts forth constant propaganda against the minority religions. Further, these religious minorities, both recognized and unrecognized, are barred from seeking a seat in higher offices in the government.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Iran to meet its own obligations via the Constitution to allow religious minorities to peacefully and freely practice their faith.
- Encourage Iran to abolish the death penalty for individuals convicted of apostasy, and to repeal blasphemy laws.
- Encourage Iran to eliminate the culture of discrimination against and persecution of Baha'i and Christians.
- Encourage Iran to allow those who leave Islam to practice their new faith or none at all as per their wishes.

Iran's Penal Code does not explicitly criminalize apostasy; however, individual courts and judges are [permitted](#) to hand down punishments according to their interpretation of Sharia'a law and fatwas. Many individuals convicted under

apostasy laws are handed the death penalty and, although death sentences are virtually never carried out, these convicted individuals are often left to languish in prison for years or decades on end. The Penal Code, however, does [criminalize](#) blasphemy, stating that "anyone who insults the sacred values of Islam or any of the Great Prophets or [twelve] Shi'ite Imams or the Holy Fatima, if considered as Saab ul-nabi [as having committed actions warranting the hadd punishment for insulting the Prophet], shall be executed; otherwise, they shall be sentenced to one to five years' imprisonment."

Among the most persecuted religious minority groups in Iran are the Baha'is and the Christian converts, both of whom are subjected to arbitrary imprisonment (for their beliefs and for their political activity), discrimination in education and government employment, surveillance and charges for illegal worship, and in some cases even torture or extrajudicial killings. Christians - especially those that converted from Islam and are involved in evangelism - can be charged with "acting against national security" or spreading "propaganda against the system." Similarly, Baha'i individuals often face charges such as "acting against the security of the country through membership in and administration of Baha'i institutions." The sentences that these individuals face simply for holding religious or spiritual convictions can range from two years to ten years, of imprisonment, often accompanied by steep fines or periods of enforced exile.

IRAN



Resources on Iran:

- Jubilee Campaign, *Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 2020, <http://jubileecampaign.org/jubilee-campaign-submission-to-the-un-human-rights-committee-on-iran/>
- Jubilee Campaign, *Written Statement: The Human Rights Council Must Ensure that there is No Penalty for Apostasy*, 2021, <http://jubileecampaign.org/the-human-rights-council-must-ensure-that-there-is-no-penalty-for-apostasy/>
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2020 Annual Report, 2020, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf



LAOS

Lao People's Democratic Republic is a communist state with significant restrictions on religious freedom. Laos is heavily dependent on China for financial assistance and loans which creates pressure on Laos to implement more restrictive policies on religious freedom.

While Laos has state approved churches and other buildings these are heavily regulated and 75% of all government-approved Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) congregations throughout the country do not have permanent church structures and have to conduct worship services in homes. Buddhists and Christians who have their own fellowships have to practice their religion in secret. Christian groups that are not recognized by the government include Methodists, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Lutherans and Baptists.

Local officials and fellow community members have threatened Christian families to renounce their faith or face eviction and confiscation of their land if they do not.

Policy Recommendations:

- The US should provide more opportunities through the International Visitor Leadership Programs (IVLP), for Lao government officials and representatives from faith communities to meet with U.S. officials and religious leaders for the purpose of fostering a greater understanding of religious freedom. (USCIRF)
- Encourage the Lao government to repeal Decree 315.
- Place pressure on the government of Laos to adopt the Optional protocol of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Adopt a religious prisoner of conscience from Laos.
- Place diplomatic pressure on Laos to cease from repatriating North Korean and Hmong Christian refugees to their respective countries. as they risk torture if they are sent back.

Authorities have also placed pressure on Christian children, forcing several to drop out of school and have allowed discrimination of Christian children in the distribution of school food.

Early 2020 authorities threatened a Lao Christian man, Sithong Theppavong because he started a small church on his farm in a region of Laos. The local authorities sent a warning trying to force him to close his church. In March 2020 they approached him and tried to force him to sign an agreement to desist, the authorities proceeded to arrest Sithong when he refused to sign. There is still no news of Sithong's whereabouts and recently in February 2021 his family have been facing harassment. Authorities have taken Sithong's wife's motorbike [the main mode of transport in the country] and investigated any individual who asks about the missing pastor's whereabouts.

USCIRF released a report regarding the religious freedom situation in Laos in 2020 and has designated Laos as a country which has, "engaged in or tolerated serious religious violations." Within the report USCIRF raised concerns especially regarding the Decree 315 which allows the Ministry of Home Affairs to regulate virtually all aspects of religious life. The Decree gives the authorities the right to restrict religious activities they perceive to be at odds with local customs, national policies, national stability, the environment, or unity between religious and ethnic groups. As a result, authorities have closed or threatened to close several churches and other places of religious worship and arbitrarily arrested Christians of different denominations.

While the Lao government has taken in over 500 000 refugees there are concerning reports of authorities breaching the principle of non-refoulement by returning Hmong Christians back to Viet Nam where it is well-documented that they risk facing persecution including torture at the hands of the Vietnamese authorities, North Korean refugees have also been refouled.

LAOS



Facts on Laos

47% of Laos' population belong to a minority ethnic group. Laos has a population of 7.9 million. These are the ethnic groups that exist in addition to the Lao people:

Khmour 11%,
Hmong 9.2%, Phouthay 3.4%, Tai 3.1%, Makong 2.5%, Katong 2.2%, Lue 2%, Akha 1.8%, other 11.6% (2015 est.)

Resources on Laos

Open Doors Country Dossier Laos | March 2021
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Laos-WWR-Full-Country-Dossier-March-2021.pdf>

USCIRF Laos Country Report 2020
https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Laos%20Country%20Update_May_0_0.pdf

Jubilee Campaign Universal Periodic Review Report on Laos | 2019
<https://jubileecampaign.org/laos-upr-2019/>

LIBYA



Open Doors [ranks](#) Libya as the 4th most dangerous nation for Christians, and Freedom House [scores](#) Libya 9 points out of 100 in terms of overall freedom. The 2011 Constitutional Declaration of Libya [designates](#) Islam as the official national religion, and stipulates that Islamic Sharia'a law shall be the main source of legislation. The Penal Code of Libya in Article 291 includes blasphemy laws that [criminalize](#) "insulting the state religion" and states that "expressions that are inappropriate for God, prophets, or messengers, shall be punished by a penalty of detention for a period not exceeding two years." Article 207 also provides for the

death penalty against "any person who promotes within the country theories or principles that aim to change the fundamental principles of the constitution or the fundamental rules...." With regards to this article, the government of Libya has arbitrarily detained Christians and other religious minorities for owning non-Islamic religious publications, engaging in missionary work, or using speech that is allegedly "offensive to Muslims."

Human rights and religious freedom NGOs have reported that Islamist jihadist militant groups have targeted religious minority communities, primarily converts to Christianity, for violent attacks, sexual assault, abductions and kidnappings, and killings. Christian migrants from other locations in sub-Saharan Africa are also victims of these abuses. Christian and religious minority survivors have identified their perpetrators as members of the Libya Shield Force, Madkhali Salafist militant groups, the Benghazi Revolutionary Brigades, the Nawasi Brigade, and others. According to Open

Doors, during the reporting period of 1 November 2018 to 31 October 2019, 10 Christians were killed, 1151 were [attacked](#), and 100 were arrested, though the organization states that these numbers may be lower estimates, as not every violent incident is reported.

Family law in Libya is also extremely biased against religious converts. In the case that a non-Muslim man wishes to marry a Muslim woman, he is [required](#) to convert to Islam, because "marriages between Muslim men and women of non-Abrahamic faiths are illegal." Open Doors reports that Christian converts have faced forced divorce and loss of custody of their children if their new faith is revealed to their families and society. Instances of forced divorce in Libya often have negative implications on the wives who are entirely financially dependent on their husbands.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Libya to eliminate both blasphemy laws and apostasy laws, the latter of which imposes the death penalty.
- Encourage the State Department to designate Libya a Country of Particular Concern unless they take steps to repeal these laws
- Encourage Libya to cease the practice of arresting Christians and other religious minorities for their ownership of religious publications and engagement in missionary work.
- Encourage Libya to take action to eradicate jihadist militant violence against Christians and other religious minorities.



LIBYA



Resources on Libya:

- Jubilee Campaign, *Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review on Libya*, 2019, <http://jubileecampaign.org/libya-upr-2019/>
- Humanists International, *The Freedom of Thought Report: Libya*, 2020, [blob:https://fot.humanists.international/65a02353-2676-455d-9657-049b5053c199](https://fot.humanists.international/65a02353-2676-455d-9657-049b5053c199)

MALAYSIA



USCIRF [recommends](#) that the State Department add Malaysia to its Special Watch List with regards to religious freedom violations, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Malaysia the 46th most dangerous nation in the world for Christians. Malaysia's Constitution of 1957 [states](#) in Article 3 that "Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation." Article 11 further provides that Malaysian citizens may propagate their religion as well as construct and manage their own houses of worship and educational institutions. However, the Malaysian Penal Code includes blasphemy laws that

[criminalize](#) acts such as "uttering words, etc., with deliberate intent to wound the religious feelings of any person", and "causing, etc., disharmony, or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill will... on grounds of religion" by terms of imprisonment no less than one year and no more than five years [Article 298]. Moreover, according to Library of Congress, national and state laws set out Sharia criminal punishments for Muslims who take part in any of the following actions: "wrongful worship"; "propagating religious beliefs and doctrines other than those of Islam among persons professing the Islamic faith"; and "insulting or bringing into contempt the religion of Islam". In 2015, one Malaysian Muslim man was [charged](#) with blasphemy for requesting information regarding the history of Islam. In 2019, six men were [fined](#) hundreds of dollars each for being absent from a Friday prayer session.

Also in 2019, three Sunni Muslim women were [investigated](#) for holding a discussion about whether they wanted to continue wearing their hijabs. Under Malaysia's blasphemy laws and a ratified 2019 [amendment](#) formally recognizing Sunni Islam as the only acceptable interpretation of Islam, Malaysian authorities have cracked down on and intimidated minority Shi'a Muslim and Ahmadiyya Muslim communities. Other religious minority communities, including Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, have reported that they feel increasing tension and rejection from the Malaysian government and society.

In February 2017, Christian Pastor Raymond Koh, leader of the Evangelical Free Church, was abducted while he was driving in Selangor state; a [video](#) captured the incident and showed three large black SUVs surrounding Pastor Koh's vehicle and forcing him to come to a stop. After all vehicles stopped, the drivers and passengers of the SUVs approached Pastor Koh's vehicle and kidnapped him, forcing him into the SUV and driving away. In 2019, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia concluded its investigation into the disappearance and relayed its findings that the Malaysian Special Branch (the intelligence branch of the Royal Malaysia Police) was responsible for the mysterious abduction. To this day four years later, Pastor Koh's whereabouts and condition [remain](#) unknown, and it is believed by his family and by the international community that he was targeted for his religious activism, as he had accused of evangelism and harassed for years prior to his disappearance.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Malaysia to repeal all blasphemy laws that are being misused to arrest individuals for questioning the tenets of their faith.
- Encourage Malaysia to cease its practice of intimidation and harassment towards religious minority communities, including Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus.
- Encourage Malaysia to exhaust all means possible to locate Pastor Koh and safely return him to his family.

MALAYSIA



Resources on Malaysia:

- Jubilee Campaign, *Freedom of Religion and Sustainable Development for an Inclusive Society in Malaysia*, Submission to the United Nations General Assembly, 2020, <http://jubileecampaign.org/submission-on-religious-minorities-in-malaysia/>
- Religious Freedom Institute, *Malaysia Religious Freedom Landscape Report*, 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57052f155559869b68a4f0e6/t/5f523883c4bb17744fe77632/1599223951527/Malaysia+ONLINE.pdf>
- The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) & The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), *Challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Malaysia: A Briefing Paper*, 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bbb229a29f2cc31b47fa99c/t/5c862a2053450a49a40c191d/1552296484138/Malaysia-Freedom-of-religion-brief-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2019-ENG.pdf>
- Humanists International, *The Freedom of Thought Report: Malaysia*, 2020, <blob:https://fot.humanists.international/687f40b9-38f0-4568-94ee-626517484d7f>

MAURITANIA



Open Doors [ranks](#) Mauritania as the 24th most dangerous nation for Christians because "public worship carries a constant threat" and "there is fear radical Islam may be on the rise." Article 5 of the Constitution of Mauritania [declares](#) Islam as the official religion "of the people and of the State," and it offers no further mention of religion nor any article regarding citizen's right to freedom of religion or belief. Article 306 of the Mauritania's Criminal Code [states](#) that "[a]ny Muslim guilty of the crime of apostasy" [renunciation of a faith and religious conversion, typically away from the state religion] is to be sentenced to death if he or she refuses to

repent and return to their original faith. In April 2018, the National Assembly [passed](#) legislation that "replaces article 306 of the Criminal Code and makes death penalty mandatory for anyone convicted of 'blasphemous speech' and acts deemed 'sacrilegious.'" This new law also eliminates the part of the original article that allowed for the possibility of exchanging the death sentence for the chance to serve time in prison, and outlines a two-year sentence and steep fine for "offending public indecency and Islamic values" and "breaching Allah's prohibitions." Mauritania also has legal framework that states that "whoever encourages incendiary discourse against the official rite of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania shall be punished by one to five years in prison." This law, however, has since been amended to immediately prescribe the death sentence. One newsworthy case was that of

Mauritanian blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Mkhatar, who was [charged](#) in 2014 with apostasy and for his online activity condemning religious persecution and the use of religion to justify slavery and caste discrimination. Courts sentenced him to death and Mkhatar spent nearly five years on death row until he was eventually [acquitted and released](#) in July 2019.

The government of Mauritania, while it does not itself register Islamic religious groups, is in charge of registering all faith-based NGOs and other organizations. NGO's wishing to hold non-Islamic religious meetings and activities must seek prior approval from the Ministry of the Interior. Generally regarding public profession of non-Islamic faiths and beliefs, [according to](#) the US Department of State, "although there remained no specific legal prohibition against non-Muslims proselytizing, the government prohibited such activity through a broad interpretation of the constitution that states Islam shall be the religion of the people and of the state. Any public expression of religion except that of Islam remained banned" as it is perceived as an act of illegal evangelism and proselytism.

With special regards to Christian convert women, they face the higher likelihood of shunning by their families, and divorce from their husbands if they are married. Families can coerce unmarried female Christian converts into marriages with Muslim men in order to forcefully keep them under the influence of Islam

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Mauritania to repeal Article 5 of the Constitution which imposes the death penalty for apostasy. Similarly, encourage Mauritania to abolish the April 2018 legislation which prescribes the death penalty for acts deemed blasphemous.
- Encourage Mauritania to cease the practice of preventing and denying faith-based NGOs from holding non-Islamic religious activities.

MAURITANIA



Resources on Mauritania:

- Jubilee Campaign, *Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review on The Islamic Republic of Mauritania*, 2020, <http://jubileecampaign.org/mauritania-upr/>
- Humanists International, *The Freedom of Thought Report: Mauritania*, 2020, [blob:https://fot.humanists.international/c2c40706-c688-4d37-a81e-dc9887c3cea1](https://fot.humanists.international/c2c40706-c688-4d37-a81e-dc9887c3cea1)
- Jubilee Campaign, *Written Statement: The Human Rights Council Must Ensure that there is No Penalty for Apostasy*, 2021, <http://jubileecampaign.org/the-human-rights-council-must-ensure-that-there-is-no-penalty-for-apostasy/>

MYANMAR (BURMA)



USCIRF [recommends](#) that Myanmar be designated a Country of Particular Concern with regards to its violations of religious freedom, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Myanmar as the 19th most dangerous nation for Christians. The 2008 Constitution of Myanmar [states](#) in Article 34 that "every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practise religion." Despite that the Constitution does not formally mandate a national religion, it does recognize that Buddhism is the faith practiced by the majority of the population. In 2015, the Burmese Parliament adopted a [collection](#) of four laws commonly referred to as the

Race and Religion Laws, which had been supported by Buddhist nationalist group Ma Ba Tha. Among this set of laws is The Religious Conversion Law which stipulates that any Burmese citizen who wishes to convert religions must gain prior approval by the Religious Board and must be observed and investigated for three months before they are allowed to convert. The Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law requires that any Buddhist woman who wishes to marry a non-Buddhist man must gain parental permission if she is under the age of 20. The last of four, the Population Control Law, requires women in certain regions to space out their children's births at least three years apart; it is important to note that this law is often applied to regions known for their ethnic and religious minority demographics.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Myanmar to abolish the discriminatory 2015 Race and Religion Laws, including The Monogamy Law and The Religious Conversion Law.
- Encourage Myanmar to address the atrocities of the 2017 Rohingya Genocide and prosecute all perpetrators of genocidal acts and crimes against humanity.
- Urge Myanmar to abide by their ceasefire commitments
- Encourage Myanmar to address the mass displacement of Rohingya Muslims.

In 2017, following an isolated sequence of attacks coordinated by self-named Rohingya radical group Arkan Rohingya Salvation Army which led to the deaths of 12 Burmese officials, the military of Myanmar [launched](#) a revenge campaign of extrajudicial killing, violence, and torture against the nation's entire Rohingya population. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, [referred](#) to the violence as "possibly amounting to crimes against humanity and "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing." The International Court of Justice [decided](#) that the standards of genocide and crimes against humanity have been met in regards to the campaign against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

Conflicts between the Myanmar Armed Forces and ethnic militant groups have left thousands displaced, especially in Rakhine and Chin States. Such high frequency of displacement has caused internal refugee camps to become overcrowded. UNHCR [reported](#) that "Myanmar authorities estimate that more than 61,000 people are newly displaced in Rakhine State as of 16 March [2020]." In Kachin State, the predominantly Christian Kachin people are increasingly vulnerable to community destruction due to violence between the Burmese military and ethnic armed organizations. These clashes have led to the destruction of no fewer than 300 local churches and disruption of humanitarian assistance, including food supply distribution.

MYANMAR (BURMA)



Resources on Myanmar:

- Jubilee Campaign, *The Persecution of Religious Minorities in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar: Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur*, 2020, <http://jubileecampaign.org/persecution-of-religious-minorities-in-the-republic-of-the-union-of-myanmar/>
- Jubilee Campaign, *The Rohingya Genocide, Transitional Justice, and Accountability*, 2021, <http://jubileecampaign.org/the-rohingya-genocide-transitional-justice-and-accountability/>
- Religious Freedom Institute, *Burma Religious Freedom Landscape Report*, 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57052f155559869b68a4f0e6/t/5f4951ec69984539d19f55c0/1598640634322/Burma+-+AUGUST+2020.pdf>
- International Commission of Jurists, *Challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Myanmar: A Briefing Paper*, 2019, <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Myanmar-Freedom-of-religion-brief-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2019-ENG.pdf>
- Free Burma Rangers, *Annual Report 2019*, 2020, <https://www.freeburmarangers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FBR-Annual-Report-2019.pdf>

NEPAL



Open Doors [ranks](#) Nepal the 32nd most dangerous nation in the world to be a Christian. The Constitution of Nepal [states](#) that it recognizes the nation's "multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural characteristics with common aspirations of people living in diverse geographical regions" and in Article 26 states that "each person shall be free to profess, practice, and preserve his/her religion according to his/her faith." In the same article, however, it states that "while exercising this right as provided for by this Article, no person shall...convert a person of one religion to another religion" even in cases where such religious

conversion is consensual and by choice of the individual. In fact, any peaceful act of encouraging another to convert religions is seen as 'forced' or 'coerced' and is punishable by five years of imprisonment, sometimes accompanied by a hefty fine. Nepal also has laws [criminalizing](#) 'religious behavior disturbing public order or contrary to public health, decency, and morality' as well as laws that prohibit evangelism and 'harming the religious sentiment' of others.

All religious houses of worship are inadmissible as legal religious institutions, with the exception of Buddhist monasteries which are able to apply for recognition. At the same time, religious minorities, particularly Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses, have been [targeted](#) for arbitrary detention for their proselytism and evangelism, as all acts of religious conversion are illegal.

Many Christian evangelicals, sometimes including missionaries from abroad, have been [arrested](#) for the simple acts of distributing Bibles or other religious materials. Moreover, [according to](#) the US State Department, "human rights experts expressed concern that a provision in the criminal code banning speech or writing harmful to others' religious sentiments could be misused to settle personal scores or target religious minorities arbitrarily." Such is a common occurrence in other nations such as Pakistan and India.

One of the most persecuted religious communities in Nepal are the Tibetan Buddhists. The Nepalese government - in particular, by dispatching police to various locations - has prevented Tibetan Buddhists from commemorating the Dalai Lama's birthday, a major religious celebration. While many Tibetan Buddhist monks have reported that they are generally able to operate their religious activities free from government restriction, they are concerned with the observable increase in government monitoring.

In March 2020, Kaski District Police [arrested](#) Pastor Keshav Acharya in his home on charges of spreading misinformation about the novel coronavirus as well as engaging in illegal proselytism. Pastor Keshav was detained in response to a video circulated online in which he was praying against COVID-19 and calling for an end to the pandemic in Jesus' name. Pastor Keshav was detained for 99 days before being granted bail and released in June 2020; however, he is still awaiting his formal trial hearing.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Nepal to abolish anti-conversion laws which view consensual religious conversions as 'coerced' and thus criminalize them. Encourage Nepal to repeal blasphemy laws and anti-proselytism laws.
- Encourage Nepal to extend legal recognition to non-Hindu and non-Buddhist religious houses of worship.
- Encourage Nepal to combat radical Hindu nationalism.

NEPAL



Resources on Nepal:

- 21Wilberforce, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Jubilee Campaign, Nepal Christian Society, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, and The Intellectual Muslim Association of Nepal, *Nepal Report: Submission for the UN Universal Periodic Review 37th Session*, 2020,
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/wdpjrwp6magg5gwo/Nepal%20UPR%2037.pdf?dl=0>
- Jubilee Campaign, *Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review on The Federal Republic of Nepal*, 2020,
<http://jubileecampaign.org/nepal-upr/>
- Religious Freedom Institute, *Nepal Religious Freedom Landscape Report*, 2020,
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57052f155559869b68a4f0e6/t/5f8710c565c6eb59bd57d5b7/1602687180626/Nepal+ONLINE.pdf>

NICARAGUA



USCIRF [recommends](#) that Nicaragua be placed on the State Department's Special Watch List for its repeated and ceaseless persecution of its faithful, notably members of the Catholic Church. The 1987 Constitution of Nicaragua [asserts](#) that there is no official state religion, and Article 29 states that "everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and thought and to profess or not profess a religion. No one shall be the object of coercive measures which diminish these rights or be compelled to declare his/her creed, ideology or beliefs." Regardless of these protections, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo

have, [according to](#) the State Department, repeatedly and blatantly "used hateful rhetoric condoning and inciting harassment, intimidation, and physical attacks targeting Roman Catholic clergy, worshippers, and places of worship." Such targeting of the Roman Catholic Church stemmed from the Church's providing medical aid and refuge to political freedom protesters. In some cases, government authorities would shut off a church's water or electricity, other times pro-Ortega civilians would surround houses of worship and harass or film worshippers as they were entering and exiting. At a 2018 funeral for a 15-year-old boy killed in the political protests, angry mobs physically assaulted and threw objects at church attendees, all while members of the Nicaraguan National Police (NNP) idly stood by without taking action. The US State Department reveals that "many religious leaders said the

government politicized religion in the context of the ongoing political crisis and social conflict of the country." Other than attacks on houses of worship and physical assault on believers, some even reported receiving death threats.

In February 2021, the parliament of Nicaragua [passed](#) a legislation prohibiting banks from closing accounts of sanctioned individuals; this action is in direct response to the United States' sanctions on individuals and political leaders who have relationships with President Ortega or are otherwise linked to the human rights violations carried out on protesters.

Many young university students, most notably the Sandinista Youth, in October 2019 embarked on a harmful social media campaign in which they posted pictures of destroyed piñatas made to look like Catholic priests. The captions stated phrases similar to the effect of "Be a patriot, kill a priest." or "the enemies of the people." This is despite the fact that many Roman Catholic churches and relevant religious buildings often offered students and other adolescents with protection should they need to escape from violent protests.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Nicaragua to cease using discriminatory and inflammatory language that paints the nation's faithful - especial Roman Catholic leaders and followers - as enemies of the state and government.
- Encourage Nicaragua to cease the persecution of and condemn attacks against the Roman Catholic Church for its assistance to political freedom protesters.
- Urge the State Department to designate Nicaragua a Country of Particular Concern.

NICARAGUA



Resources on Nicaragua:

- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Country Update: Nicaragua*, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1263651/download>
- United States Department of State, *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nicaragua*, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NICARAGUA-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Jubilee Campaign, *Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding Nicaragua*, 129th Session, 2020, <http://jubileecampaign.org/jubilee-campaign-submission-to-the-un-human-rights-committee-on-nicaragua/>

NIGERIA



USCIRF [recommends](#) that Nigeria be designated a Country of Particular Concern, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Nigeria the 12th most dangerous country for Christians. While Nigeria's constitution includes provisions [providing](#) citizens with freedom of religion or belief, Nigeria's Criminal Code includes blasphemy laws which [posit](#) harsh punishments for "anyone who does an act which any class of persons consider as a public insult to their religion." Any individual, often a religious minority such as a Christian, can be accused of blasphemy and sentenced without proper evidence.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage the State Department to appoint a Special Envoy to Nigeria and the Lake Chad region to monitor and report on the violence.
- Encourage Nigeria to prosecute all violent Islamic jihadists, including members of Boko Haram and radical Fulani militants, who are known for their kidnappings and violent attacks on predominantly Christian communities, respectively.
- Encourage Nigeria to safely withdraw prisoner of conscience Leah Sharibu from Boko Haram captivity and return her to her grieving family.

Nigerian Christians and peaceful Muslims have become the victims of violent attacks by Islamist groups such as Boko Haram and Fulani militants. In 2014, Boko Haram members [kidnapped](#) 276 Nigerian schoolgirls from their school in Chibok. Some victims have escaped or otherwise been released, but over 100 remain in Boko Haram captivity. In 2018, Boko Haram [conducted](#) a similar mass kidnapping of 110 schoolgirls - primarily Christian - from their school in Dapchi. The International Committee on Nigeria (ICON) [predicts](#) that Boko Haram can be attributed as the primary actor in 2,989 violent incidents in Nigeria leading to the deaths of 20,436 citizens.

Over the past few years, Fulani militants have wreaked havoc across the Middle Belt of Nigeria, According to the International Society for Civilian

Liberties & Rule of Law, 620 Nigerian Christians [were killed](#) in Fulani militant attacks in just the first half of 2020. The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief [report](#) that no fewer than 6,000 Christian deaths since 2015 can be attributed to Fulani militant attacks. Some local organizations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria, however, report that 6,000 Christians have been killed by Fulani militants in just six months between January and June 2018. Despite the prevalence of these savage attacks and killings, the security forces of Nigeria have been unable or unwilling to properly intervene for conflict resolution and de-escalation. Moreover, the Fulani militant perpetrators are neither prosecuted nor held accountable for their crimes. Human Rights Watch reveals that, while commissions of inquiry have been put into place, they have become a method to reinforce impunity for the perpetrators.

Religious prisoner of conscience Leah Sharibu is one of the girls who [was abducted](#) in February 2018 by Boko Haram. Leah's classmates who have since been released from captivity have reported that Leah is still held because she refuses to renounce Christianity and convert to Islam in exchange for her release. Leah has spent her 15th and 16th birthdays in Boko Haram captivity, and her mother, Rebecca Sharibu, has visited the United States to tell her daughter's story and [plea](#) for international action. Rebecca has stated that despite numerous attempts to engage with the Nigerian government on securing Leah's release, no concrete steps have been made.

NIGERIA



Resources on Nigeria:

- Jubilee Campaign, *Nigeria - This Genocide is Loading: Finding Reasonable Basis to Believe Crimes Against Humanity Occurred*, Report to the International Criminal Court, http://jubileecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Jubilee-Campaign-Genocide-is-Loading-in-Nigeria-2020_11-1.pdf
- International Committee on Nigeria (ICON), *Nigeria's Silent Slaughter: Genocide in Nigeria and the Implications for the International Community*, 2020, <https://clientwebproof.com/Nigeria-Silent-Slaughter/>
- Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, United States Congress, *Conflict and Killings in Nigeria's Middle Belt*, 17 December 2020, <https://youtu.be/HPmcjiGyFol>
- All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?*, 2020, <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/200615-Nigeria-Unfolding-Genocide-Report-of-the-APPG-for-FoRB.pdf>
- Jubilee Campaign, *Report to the United Nations General Assembly on Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16): NGO Submission on Religion in the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, <http://jubileecampaign.org/submit-on-freedom-of-religion-in-nigeria/>

Additional Policy Recommendations for Nigeria:

- Encourage Nigeria to repeal all blasphemy laws.
- Support the resolution calling on the United Nations to conduct an independent Commission of Inquiry into all sides of the violence in Nigeria.
- Encourage the State Department to uphold its designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern
- Encourage the State Department to raise the necessity for secular laws in all of Nigeria.

NORTH KOREA



USCIRF [recommends](#) that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) be designated a Country of Particular Concern in regards to its complete revocation of religious freedom and other personal rights. Open Doors [ranks](#) the DPRK the most dangerous nation for Christians, and Freedom House [grades](#) North Korea 3 points out of 100 in terms of overall freedom. While the constitution stipulates that "citizens have freedom of religious beliefs". NGOs and even the United States Department of State reveals that this is far from the reality of rights provision in DPRK.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage North Korea to provide its citizens with the most fundamental human rights, including religious freedom and freedom from arbitrary deprivation of life.
- In line with USCIRF's recommendations, encourage North Korea to "grant international human rights monitors unfettered access to document human rights conditions, including religious freedom, inside the country...."
- Convene a hearing on the trafficking of North Korean women to China and what happens to them when they are forcibly returned.

When speaking about existing civil society in North Korea, the underground churches are the only known organised pockets of freedom of expression in the DPRK. The lack of free flow of information into North Korea is a key concern.

State control and the deity statues of the Kim family however, has meant severe [persecution](#) for freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Authorities' pressure and detention of individuals who adhere to Christianity has forced individuals to keep their faith a secret from their families until their deaths as North Korean citizens are encouraged to spy on their neighbors and report suspicious activity. [According to](#) Open Doors, the DPRK arbitrarily detains, places in labor prisons, tortures, or publicly executes Christians, and their families face similar treatment. This is because Christians and religious believers are perceived as 'fanatical, 'superstitious', or even 'western

spies.' One South Korean NGO [reports](#) that from 2007 to 2018, there were a total of 1,341 cases in which the North Korean government violated its citizens' rights to freedom of religion of belief, 120 of which were extrajudicial killings of the faithful and 90 of which were enforced disappearances. Despite the sinister repression and treatment of Christians and religious believers by the government, there is evidence that Christianity has remained a relevant influence in the country, as there are numerous underground churches for clandestine worship.

North Korean women face incredible suffering in North Korea. Interviews and surveys conducted with North Korean defector women reveal that the most [common](#) and [egregious](#) violations of women's rights they experienced include: domestic abuse, sexual harassment and rape in detention centers and prisons, forced abortions and sterilizations, human trafficking and forced marriage, and trafficking into the cybersex industry. Particularly North Korean defector women who are captured and forcibly repatriated to North Korea face the aforementioned violations of rights, as well as physical torture, forced starvation and malnutrition, compulsory labor, and unhygienic prison conditions all as forms of punishment for their attempted escapes. Jubilee Campaign has annually [raised](#) the situation of North Korean women in conjunction with the Commission on the Status of Women meetings at the UN in New York.

NORTH KOREA



Resources on North Korea:

- Korea Future Initiative, *Persecuting Faith: Documenting religious freedom violations in North Korea*, October 2020, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5dc1aed040fe330ac04da331/t/5fa21696f982403f01aa5f36/1604458198105/Persecuting_Faith_Eng.pdf
- Korea Future Initiative, *Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China*, 2019, <https://www.koreafuture.org/projects/sexual-violence?rq=sex%20slaves>
- United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *"I still feel the pain...": Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, July 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/HR_Violations_against_Women_DPRK_EN.pdf
- United Nations Human Rights Council 46th Session, *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Promoting accountability in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/46/52>
- Human Rights Watch, *"You Cry at Night but Don't Know Why": Sexual Violence against Women in North Korea*, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/northkorea1118_web2.pdf
- Human Rights Watch, *"Worth Less Than an Animal": Abuses and Due Process Violations in Pre-Trial Detention in North Korea*, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/10/northkorea1020_insert.pdf

PAKISTAN



USCIRF [recommends](#) Pakistan be designated a Country of Particular Concern, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Pakistan the 5th most dangerous nation for Christians. The Constitution of Pakistan [designates](#) Islam as the official state religion but Article 20 states that "every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion." Contrastingly, Section 295C of the Penal Code of Pakistan [criminalizes](#) blasphemy, or "use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet." Religious minorities are disproportionately targeted by the blasphemy

laws. One such individual, Asia Bibi, [was convicted](#) by the court and received the death sentence for allegedly making blasphemous remarks. Bibi spent a decade on death row before she was finally acquitted of her charges and released in 2018 due to "inconsistent statements" by the accusers and "material contradictions." In a similar case, Pakistani Christian couple Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar were [accused of](#) sending blasphemous text messages and were convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death in 2014. The accuser's claims were dubious from the start, as he stated that the defendants sent the text in the English language, despite the fact that the couple are illiterate in their own language of Urdu, let alone English. Shagufta and Shafqat were convicted, and have appealed their charges, though the appeal has been repeatedly postponed throughout 2020. Asia Bibi's lawyer Saif-ul Malook has taken up the case of Shagufta and Shafqat and believes that they will receive a favorable result soon. Another [concerning trend](#) is the forced abduction, conversion, and marriage of religious minority girls in Pakistan. According to the

Policy Recommendations:

- Urge the State Department to keep Pakistan listed as a Country of Particular Concern unless they repeal their blasphemy laws in accordance with international law and UN recommendations.
- In the meantime urge Pakistan to remove the death penalty for blasphemy and make blasphemy a bailable offence.
- Call for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience imprisoned under the problematic blasphemy laws.
- Consider adopting Shafqat and Shagufta as prisoners of conscience by urging Pakistan to acquit them from their blasphemy charges.
- Encourage Pakistan to take action to eliminate the forced abduction, marriage, and religious conversion of religious minority girls.

National Commission of Justice and Peace (NCJP) and the Pakistan Hindu Council, each year about 1,000 Pakistani Christian and Hindu girls [are kidnapped](#), forcibly converted to Islam, and married to their rapists and abductors.

Because Muslims account for more than 96 percent of Pakistan's population, non-Muslims and lower-caste individuals are seen as lesser citizens, and therefore there is a culture of impunity for violence against them. In October 2020, a 13-year-old Pakistani Christian girl named Arzoo Raja [was kidnapped](#) outside of her home by a 45-year-old Muslim man. Following the abduction, Arzoo was coerced into converting to Islam and was forcibly married to her captor, who claimed that Arzoo was 18 years old and of legal marriage age. However, Arzoo's father provided the court with a First Information Report including documentation that proved that Arzoo was just 13 years old and that she had been raped by her perpetrator. The court decided in November that this was an illegal instance of child marriage and is currently investigating the rape. Arzoo was ordered to stay in a safe house until the age of 18 as she has told the court that she wishes to not return to her family; however, lawyers have revealed that she likely claimed this under pressure from her captor.

PAKISTAN



Resources on Pakistan:

- Jubilee Campaign, Abduction, Conversion and Child Marriage in Pakistan, November 2020, http://jubileecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Abduction-Conversion-and-Child-Marriage-of-Religious-Minority-Girls-in-Pakistan_JCUS-1.pdf
- Religious Freedom Institute, *Pakistan Religious Freedom Landscape Report*, 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57052f155559869b68a4f0e6/t/5f62093512af1c304a5a45f5/1600260418949/Pakistan+Sept+2020+ONLINE.pdf>
- H. Res 512 Calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/512>
- Church in Chains, *Shagufta & Shafqat*, <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/shagufta-shafqat/>
- BBC News, "*Asia Bibi: I always believed I would be freed*", 28 February 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51658141>

SUDAN



In 2020, USCIRF [recommended](#) that Sudan be placed on the State Department's Special Watch List with regards to religious freedom violations; this recommendation was a demotion from the previous year, during which USCIRF [recommended](#) Sudan be designated a Country of Particular Concern. This change in USCIRF's recommendation is a response to the tremendous strides taken by Sudan to improve religious freedom conditions throughout late 2019 and early 2020. USCIRF commended Sudan for the major positive steps taken, yet still asserts that "serious challenges remain" that still need to be addressed for Sudan to be removed from the list of countries recommended for the SWL. Still, Sudan is included in this fact sheet as now more than ever it is essential for the United States to support Sudan in its transitional reform towards fully safeguarding religious freedom and human rights.

Policy Recommendations:

- Continue to encourage Sudan to make steps towards expanding human rights and religious freedom, such as by eliminating obstacles to obtaining recognition for religious communities as well as obtaining permission to build and manage houses of worship.
- Encourage Sudan to welcome visits and reporting by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Mr. Ahmed Shaheed
- Encourage other nations in the world with apostasy laws and policies/practices criminalizing religious conversion and denunciation - notably Afghanistan, Iran, Mauritania, Oman, Pakistan, and Qatar - to follow in the footsteps of Sudan to repeal these harmful and discriminatory laws
- Encourage Sudan to ensure the separation of religion and state affairs.

Among Sudan's most [noteworthy](#) recent achievements is first and foremost its 2020 abolition of apostasy laws pursuant to the new Miscellaneous Amendments Act; this act goes further to extend women's travel rights, criminalize female genital mutilation and cutting, eliminate alcohol restrictions on non-Muslims, and establish a national commission on religious freedom. Earlier, in 2019, Sudan's transitional government approved an interim constitution that includes provisions [protecting](#) the right to freedom of religion or belief and prohibiting discrimination on the basis of faith. Moreover, foreign NGOs who are involved in providing medical and educational assistance have been allowed back into the country to continue their activism.

There are existing issues that need to be addressed by Sudan's transitional government, however. As recently as a few years ago, radical Islamic ideology dominated the nation's institutions, religious minorities were repeatedly arrested and detained for their affiliations, churches were demolished and destroyed, and ethno-religious tensions and violence were at the forefront of the nation's reputation. According to USCIRF, Sudan's broad Protestant Christian community have welcomed reform, but have "insisted that it has not yet dismantled the convoluted system of zoning restrictions, bureaucratic impasses, and other obstacles that prevent them from reclaiming property, receiving formal recognition, and otherwise trusting that their situation has irrevocably changed." Moreover, "while the recent Fundamental Rights and Freedoms Act removed the punishment of flogging, blasphemy is still criminalized and carries a punishment of up to six months imprisonment."

SUDAN



Resources on Sudan:

- Voice of America, "Sudanese Christian, Muslim Leaders Agree to Promote Religious Freedom", October 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/sudanese-christian-muslim-leaders-agree-promote-religious-freedom>
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Policy Update: Sudan - One Year of Progress Advancing Religious Freedom in Sudan*, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1315691/download>
- Middle East Monitor, "Sudan welcomes its removal US list of violators of religious freedoms", December 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201209-sudan-welcomes-its-removal-us-list-of-violators-of-religious-freedoms/>
- International Christian Concern, "Christian Leaders in Sudan say Still Missing Freedom", January 2021, <https://www.persecution.org/2021/01/10/christian-leaders-sudan-say-still-missing-freedom/>

SYRIA



USCIRF [recommends](#) that Syria be designated a Country of Particular Concern, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Syria the 12th most dangerous nation for Christians. Article 2 of the 2012 Constitution of Syria [states](#) that, while "the state shall respect all religions" and "the personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected," legislation shall be based on Islamic jurisprudence. The 1949 Penal Code of Syria [states](#) in article 462 that acts of "denigrating" or "publicly defaming" religious observances is subject to imprisonment for a period of two months to two years. Acts of evangelism and proselytism are strictly prohibited

and conversion to Islam, though not illegal, is so taboo and unacceptable that such conversions must be kept private for fear of being accused of offending the religious majority group. Contrastingly, conversions to Islam are permissible.

Policy Recommendations:

- Urge the State Department to designate Syria as a Country of Particular Concern due to the continued vulnerability and insecurity of religious minorities to violence and displacement.
- Call on Syria to work to dissolve conflict in the northeast region and restore security so that the thousands of displaced civilians, including Yazidis, Christians, and Kurds can return safely
- Call on Syria to take measures to eliminate the negative stigma and pressure towards Christianity and religious conversions away from Islam.

USCIRF and the US State Department identify the terrorist activities of ISIS and Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as the major threats to religious freedom, as they maintain a "genocidal ideology" and conduct violence and extrajudicial killings against primarily Sunni Muslims. The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Syria also [concluded](#) that "until its territorial defeat in April, ISIS killed hundreds of civilian men, women, and children through public executions, crucifixions, and beheadings on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, and homosexuality." Both USCIRF and the State Department will consider ISIS to be an

extant threat even throughout 2020. In November 2019, ISIS militants [killed](#) two Armenian Catholic priests. Moreover, ISIS has engaged in mass kidnappings of Yazidis and other Christians, with some 3,000 [remaining](#) disappeared at the end of 2019.

Another major point of concern in Syria is the [infiltration](#) of Turkish forces into the northeastern region in October 2019. The Turkish army, backed by Turkish-sponsored opposition groups, descended upon the areas held by the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This violent incursion between The TSOs, Turkish Army, SDF, and Free Syria Army (FSA) caused the [displacement](#) of some 200,000 civilians including Christians, Yazidis, and Turkmen; by year's end in 2019, approximately half of the displaced had returned to their homes. According to USCIRF, "others who stayed in place - including members of a community of Kurdish Christians from Muslim backgrounds - had not yet faced direct violence, but remained in constant state of fear."

SYRIA



Resources on Syria:

- Humanists International, *The Freedom of Thought Report: Syria*, 2020, [blob:https://fot.humanists.international/bfcd4cc7-47e8-47a3-8105-287039f1a6e0](https://fot.humanists.international/bfcd4cc7-47e8-47a3-8105-287039f1a6e0)
- United Nations Human Rights Council 45th Session, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 2020, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/45/31>
- Voice of America, "Syrian Christians Fear Persecution During Turkey Offensive, October 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/syrian-christians-fear-persecution-during-turkey-offensive>
- UN Human Rights Council 45th Session, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session44/Documents/A_HRC_44_61_AdvanceUneditedVersionFINAL.docx

THAILAND



Thailand's 2017 Constitution [states](#) that "a person shall enjoy full liberty to profess a religion, and shall enjoy the liberty to exercise or practice a form of worship in accordance with his or her religious principles...." The government has generally abided by this provision and has not encroached upon its citizens' right to freedom of religion or belief. However, of great concern to human rights and religious freedom advocacy organizations is Thailand's [treatment](#) of Christian asylum seekers fleeing religious persecution in Pakistan. Thailand is [not party](#) to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, nor its 1967 Protocol. The United Nations

High Commissioner for Refugees, while it operates in Bangkok and conducts refugee status determination, does not have authority of the Thai government. Thai authorities have historically refused to recognize Pakistani Christian as legitimate asylum seekers or refugees, and instead they consider them "illegal aliens". Pakistani Christian asylum seekers are often subjected to arbitrary arrest and imprisonment at an Immigration Detention Center, where conditions are [deplorable](#).

Thai immigration officials often conduct surprise raids and mass arrests of Pakistani Christians. In October 2018, following Deputy Prime Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan's order to arrest and deport within one month every illegal migrant, authorities [arrested](#) some 200 individuals, many of whom were Pakistani Christians. In July 2019, Thai authorities [arrested](#) 51 Pakistani Christian asylum seekers from a cheap apartment complex in Bangkok. It is believed that the location of these

refugees was provided to police by a displeased local civilian. When fearful refugees refused to answer their doors to the police, authorities broke in and detained entire families, including the elderly and young children. Just a few months later, in December 2019, officials [detained](#) another 36 Pakistani Christian refugees.

Pakistani Christian asylum seekers as well as other refugees in Thailand must deal with abhorrent and inhumane conditions in the Immigration Detention Centers. There are very few medical services, and those that are present often do not offer proper medication and treatment. It is reported that a single cell in the IDCs holds upwards of 100 detainees, and the tremendous overcrowding causes stench, inability to sleep, and major sickness. In September 2018, one Pakistani Christian asylum seeker, Saleem Iqbal, [revealed](#) that he and his brother, while in an IDC, were restricted to a living-room-sized cell with just two squat toilets, where they remained handcuffed and were permitted to just four hours of outside time per week. In August 2018, 34-year-old Pakistani Christian asylum seeker Ijaz Tariq [passed away](#) from a heart attack in Bangkok's IDC just a day after he was denied refugee status from UNHCR. Tariq had told officers in the IDC that he was experiencing severe chest pains, but they refused to transport him to hospital for treatment.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Thailand to develop a mechanism for screening refugees and other undocumented foreigners and develop framework that enshrines the protection and rights of such refugees.
- Encourage Thailand to develop alternatives to detention, or make detentions of refugees bailable, as detention is to be used only as an exceptional measure based on individual assessment of humanitarian needs, and for the least amount of time necessary.
- Urge the UNHCR to review their asylum process to remove obstacles and take into consideration the trauma of refugees and their home country's conditions.

THAILAND



Resources on Thailand:

- Jubilee Campaign, *Update on Jubilee Campaign's 2015 report 'Don't Turn Them Back!'*, 2019, http://jubileecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Jubilee-Campaign_Report-Thailand_2019_JCUS.pdf
- CATO Institute, *"Desperate Pakistani Christians Languish in Thailand. the U.S. Should Provide Asylum"*, 2018, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/desperate-pakistani-christians-languish-thailand-us-should-provide-asylum>
- International Christian Concern, *"Dozens of Pakistani Christian Refugees Arrested in Bangkok"*, 2019, <https://www.persecution.org/2019/12/23/dozens-pakistani-christian-refugees-arrested-bangkok/>

TURKEY



USCIRF [recommends](#) that the State Department place Turkey on its Special Watch List with regards to religious freedom violations. Similarly Open Doors [ranks](#) Turkey the 25th most dangerous nation to be a Christian. Turkey's 1982 Constitution [declares](#) the nation as secular and provides all citizens with the right to freedom of religion and conscience in Article 24. Some other constitutional articles, however, derogate from this provision. For instance, Article 24 also requires "religious and moral education and instruction" be taught in schools, and it also states that "no one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or

held sacred by religion." The latter of which is further penalized [according to](#) Article 125 of Turkey's Criminal Code. In 2013, human rights activist Sevan Nisanyan was [charged](#) with blasphemy and sentenced to 13 months in prison for condemning the government's treatment of individuals who raise negative opinions on religion.

Throughout 2019 and 2020, the most pressing threats to religious freedom, according to USCIRF, include vandalism and unjust interference with houses of worship. In July 2020, President Recep Erdogan signed documentation [converting](#) the historical Hagia Sophia into a mosque. This move disheartened the nation's Orthodox Christian community, as the Hagia Sophia had originally been a church for some 900 years before it was converted to a mosque in 1453 upon the Ottoman

conquer. Since 1935, however, the Hagia Sophia has acted as a museum open to all individuals and a revered symbol for Christians and Muslims alike. President Erdogan's recent decision to reconvert the Hagia Sophia into a mosque attempts to erase its history as a church and alienate Christians who respect it so deeply. In similar fashion, in August 2020, President Erdogan [announced](#) that another Byzantine church-turned-museum, St. Saviour in Chora, would be reopened as a mosque. In response the Greek Orthodox ministry labeled the decision "a provocation against all believers."

Turkey's Alevi Muslims, the nation's largest religious minority demographic, continued to be denied official recognition and permission to open houses of worship. At the same time, Turkey's government continued to [prohibit](#) the re-opening of the Halki Seminary, which had for years prior to its closure been a location for Greek Orthodox worship and training of clergy. And the cemetery and spiritual sites for numerous religious communities, Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, were vandalized or fell into disrepair.

It is essential to note that since 2018, Turkish military has invaded and [controlled](#) Afrin, a region in north-eastern Syria. There, they have wreaked havoc on Kurdish, Yazidi, Christian and other religious minority communities by engaging in killings, physical torture, abductions, and destruction of infrastructure. Hundreds of thousands of residents have been forcibly displaced.

Policy Recommendations:

- Encourage Turkey to repeal all blasphemy laws, including Article 125 of the Criminal Code.
- Urge Turkey to cease its occupation in Northeast Syria which has endangered religious minority communities.
- Hold Turkey accountable for its crimes against humanity in Afrin (Northern Syria).
- Encourage Turkey to cease the practice of converting historical former churches and museums into operating mosques.

TURKEY



Resources on Turkey:

- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2020 Annual Report - Turkey Chapter*, 2020, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Turkey.pdf>
- Catholic News Agency, *"Turkey disputes US religious freedom commission's assessment of Turkey"*, 1 May 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/turkey-disputes-us-religious-freedom-commissions-assessment-of-turkey-77732>
- Merrit Kennedy & Peter Kenyon, *"Turkey Converts Istanbul's Iconic Hagia Sophia Back Into A Mosque"*, 10 July 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/10/889691777/turkish-court-ruling-clears-way-for-hagia-sophia-to-be-converted-to-a-mosque>
- Associated Press, *"After Hagia Sophia, Turkey turns another museum into mosque"*, 21 August 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/religion-international-news-middle-east-europe-28abfe52f1ed887c743eeaa39c92d6f3>

Current case:

In January 2020, Christian couple and parents of a local Christian priest, Mr Hurmuz Diril and Mrs. Simoni Diri, disappeared after reporting that they had received numerous threats from local community members. The next day, a witness informed the couple's son, Father Remzi Diril, that the two had been abducted by members of the terrorist group Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); Father Diril subsequently opened an investigation and search party into his parents' whereabouts. Two months later, in late March 2020, authorities found the dismembered body of Father Diril's mother, Simoni, in a mountain area near Mehre village, though they have made no further progress in locating his father, Hurmuz. The family of the deceased and missing have called upon authorities to determine who the perpetrators are and prosecute them; at the same time, they have asserted that officials did not conduct a proper search for Mr. and Mrs. Diril, and that inclement weather conditions had been used as an excuse to postpone the search.

VIETNAM



USCIRF [recommends](#) that the State Department designate Vietnam a Country of Particular Concern, and Open Doors [ranks](#) Vietnam the 21st most dangerous nation for Christians for the following reasons: non-Catholic Christians and politically active Christians are targeted by the government for persecution, and Christians who converted from other religions face pressure from their families and society. Article 24 of the Constitution of Vietnam [states](#) that "everyone shall enjoy freedom of belief and religion; he or she can follow any religion or follow none. All religions are equal before the law." Moreover, the Criminal Code of Vietnam [criminalizes](#) acts

which violate the rights of all citizens to freedom of religion, and poses the punishment of imprisonment for perpetrators. However, problematic laws provide the government with superfluous control over the nation's religious affairs and allow the government to restrict religious freedom if it is perceived as threatening national security and social harmony. The 2018 Law on Belief and Religion [presents](#) major difficulties and obstacles to religious groups that want to register with the government, and it also [states](#) that "individuals may not use the right of belief and religious freedom to undermine peace, national independence, and unification; incite violence or propagate wars; proselytize in contravention of the state's laws and policies; divide people, nationalities, or religions...." Such restrictions - especially that religious freedoms can be rescinded in the case that an individual or

group is accused of subversion of the state or national security - are concerning considering that such laws have been used in other nations to falsely accuse and imprison members of religious minority communities.

Some of the most persecuted believers in Vietnam include the Hmong and Montagnard Christians who live in the Central Highlands. Members of these communities are often denied household registrations and national identification documentation as a means of punishment for belonging to unregistered faiths. The withholding of this documentation places Hmong and Montagnard Christians in even greater vulnerability because these documents are required to apply for employment, education for their children, business licenses, bank accounts, and even healthcare and welfare. Couples that do not have these important documents are also unable to register the births of their children, rendering entire families [stateless](#).

Vietnam's Buddhist communities have also become victims of government repression and [persecution](#). In January 2019, government officials destroyed the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam's Son Linh Tu Pagoda. In October 2020, government authorities physically assaulted a group of six independent Hoa Hao Buddhists engaging in peaceful political protests against the state-sponsored Hoa Hao group which was supporting the demolition of the ancient An Hoa Pagoda. Khmer Krom Buddhists and monks reported being arbitrarily detained and forced into military service to prevent their entry into monasteries.

Policy Recommendations:

- Urge Vietnam to grant IDs and household registration for Hmong and Montagnard Christians so that their children can go to school.
- Urge the State Department to designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern.
- Encourage Vietnam to stop its discrimination and persecution of the Hmong and Montagnard Christian communities.

VIETNAM



Resources on Vietnam:

- ADF International, "Teenagers win legal struggle to attend school in Vietnam", 16 December 2020, <https://adfinternational.org/news/teenagers-win-legal-struggle-to-attend-school-in-vietnam/>
- Jubilee Campaign and Boat People SOS (BPSOS), *Viet Nam continues to leave Hmong and Montagnard Christians effectively stateless*, A/HRC/43/NGO/183, <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/HRC/43/NGO/183>
- Jubilee Campaign, *Arbitrary and Prolonged Detention in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, <http://jubileecampaign.org/arbitrary-and-prolonged-detention-in-vietnam/>

Concrete actions for your member:

- **Adopt a prisoner of conscience from Vietnam**
 - Vietnam has responded to outside pressure. In 2020 a representative adopted Pastor A. Dao through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.
 - Even when a prisoner of conscience is not released just having a US congressman raising their case has led to the persecuting state to take note and improve the treatment of the prisoner. For example, there have been cases when the prisoner of conscience has been removed from a solitary cell or been given more time outdoors or improved food.
 - The exposure works on Vietnam as they are trying to keep a flawless image internationally.
- **Join the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**
- **Join the International Religious Freedom Roundtable to get updates on the religious freedom situation around the world affecting all faith groups and none.**