

A too-narrow vision of religious freedom

– The Trump administration embraces a laudable desire to expand religious tolerance, but its own intolerance toward some undermines the message. –

By The Editorial Board –

New York Times (16.08.2018) – <https://nyti.ms/2Pnlu8Y> – Even President Trump's fiercest critics can find something to applaud in the administration's campaign to protect and advance religious freedom around the world.

The State Department's inaugural conference on the subject drew hundreds of activists and scores of foreign officials to Washington last month and produced a statement of core beliefs and a plan to hold follow-up meetings in the United States and overseas.

Invoking the 70-year-old Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the conference's concluding statement asserted that “every person has the right to hold any faith or belief, or none at all, and enjoys the freedom to change faith” and argued that “defending the freedom of religion or belief is the collective responsibility of the global community.” To which we say, amen.

But the initiative's good intentions are in danger of being undermined by the administration's political agenda, which emphasizes the American strain of evangelical Christianity over other beliefs. In addition, the administration is pursuing immigration and foreign aid policies that belie its stated defense of religious rights.

The conference was ostensibly called to address the rising threat to religious freedom. Some 80 percent of the global population is severely limited in exercising this right, and of the world's 198 countries, 55 countries, or 28 percent,

experienced high or very high levels of government restrictions on religion in 2016, according to a recent study from the Pew Research Center.

While the horrific genocides against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and against the Yazidis in Iraq have been widely publicized, there are countless other examples of religious-based persecution and discrimination – against Coptic Christians in Egypt, Muslim Uighurs and Tibetan Buddhists in China, Bahais in Iran, and others.

The Trump administration is not the first to speak up for religious liberty. Since 1998, when Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, the State Department has issued annual assessments on how countries handle the issue and has used various government tools to defend groups and individuals overseas who are persecuted or discriminated against.

The current administration took its advocacy to a new level with the three-day conference, whose invited participants were more diverse than many expected. Despite his own strict Catholic leanings, Sam Brownback, the ambassador for international religious freedom, said the goal was to protect religious freedom for all, “not to say we favor this faith or that faith.”

Yet, the event, headlined by Vice President Mike Pence, an evangelical Christian, was clearly meant to appeal most to the evangelicals who are among the president’s most fervent political supporters, reflecting a selectivity that is antithetical to the very concept of religious freedom.

One major focus was a demand for the release of Andrew Brunson, an American Christian pastor held by Turkey for nearly two years on bogus charges of complicity in the 2016 aborted coup. Under pressure from evangelicals, Mr. Trump earlier this month imposed sanctions on Turkey, shaking its

fragile economy, in an effort to secure Mr. Brunson's release. The president has been silent about 19 other detained Americans, including a NASA scientist who is Muslim.

The presence of a Hungarian delegation seemed particularly at odds with conference aims of promoting "equality under the law." Although Hungary's authoritarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has turned the Christian-majority country from democracy to nationalism and Islamophobia, he was praised by the evangelical Christian leader Tony Perkins for supporting persecuted Christians around the world.

President Barack Obama made a point of reaching out to the Muslim world, as well as to other faith communities. And like previous presidents, he tended to consider religious rights within the broad spectrum of human and civil rights. Countries that deny religious freedom invariably restrict other freedoms as well.

Many evangelicals, however, are increasingly promoting religious freedom as "our first freedom," as Mr. Pence did in his speech. Their argument is that human rights are becoming politicized and conflated with economic and social goals, such as equal rights for workers, women and gay and transgender people.

There are other reasons to question the administration's motives, starting with the fact that it has been reliably tough on human rights abuses only when they involve adversaries like Iran, North Korea and Cuba. Last year, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told aides not to let human rights concerns create "obstacles" in pursuing American interests. In a memo, one of his advisers said that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Philippines, whose repressive leaders are admired by the president, should be given a pass on rights questions.

Then there are Mr. Trump's disgraceful attempts to ban Muslims

from some countries from entering the United States; his reprehensible treatment of refugees and immigrants, especially in separating children from their parents; and his continued support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has caused a humanitarian catastrophe.

Such behavior hardly reflects the “tolerance” and appreciation of “human dignity” that conference documents endorsed.

Supporting people facing religious persecution overseas is both a moral burden of the United States and an exercise in self-interest. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, religious freedom is “an essential building block for all free societies.” But it is not the only one.

If the Trump administration aspires to truly advance religious freedom, it will need to embrace a far broader vision of human rights.

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What went wrong with human

rights

The conflation of 'natural law' with 'positive law' handed communism

a philosophical victory after the end of the Cold War

Interview of Dr Aaron Rhodes (aaronarhodes@gmail.com) in Wall Street Journal

By James Taranto

Wall Street Journal (17.08.2018) – <https://on.wsj.com/2MC3oS3> – When the U.S. withdrew in June from the United Nations Human Rights Council, Ambassador Nikki Haley described the council as “a protector of human-rights abusers, and a cesspool of political bias.” Aaron Rhodes agrees but thinks Ms. Haley was too gentle.

“The Human Rights Council has become a cover for dictatorships,” he says. “They assume the high moral ground of standing for ‘dialogue’ and ‘cooperation,’ a tactic for smothering the truth about denying freedom. Raising human-rights concerns is dismissed as divisive and confrontational, and a threat to ‘stability.’ Most of the debate there is technocratic blah-blah about global social policy-not about human rights at all.”

To U.N. watchers it’s a familiar critique, but Mr. Rhodes, 69, applies it far more broadly. In his recent book, “The Debasement of Human Rights: How Politics Sabotage the Ideal of Freedom,” he argues that virtually the entire human-rights enterprise has been corrupted by a philosophical error enshrined in the U.N.’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights-and that this explains the travesty of the Human Rights Council.

That error is the conflation of “natural law” with “positive law.” Mr. Rhodes explains the difference: “Natural law is a

kind of constraint on positive law." Think of America's Bill of Rights, whose opening clause is "Congress shall make no law." The idea is "that laws have to answer to a higher law," he says. "This is a vision of law that is very deeply embedded in Western civilization," finding premodern expression in the ideas of the Greek Stoics and the Roman statesman Cicero, as well as in biblical canon law. Natural law is universal-or at least claims to be.

"Positive law," Mr. Rhodes continues, "is the law of states and governments." A statute like the Social Security Act of 1935 creates "positive rights"-government-conferred benefits to which citizens have a legal entitlement. Positive law is particular to a nation or other polity: "I live in Germany," says Mr. Rhodes, a native of upstate New York whom I met during his U.S. book tour. "I enjoy a lot of economic and social rights there, but they reflect the political values of that community." The Germans are "keen on being a moral society, where the state helps people. They're statist. This is their mentality, but I don't think it's the same mentality here."

Not everyone, however, accepts the idea of natural law. Adherents to the doctrine of legal positivism assert, in Mr. Rhodes's words, "that all law is positive law, and the rest of it is just an illusion." In this view, there is no difference in kind between, say, the right to free speech and the right to collect a Social Security check. Neither right is intrinsic to human nature, and both are bestowed by government.

Even in the U.S., the boundary between natural and positive law began to blur decades before the U.N.'s founding. Early-20th-century progressives, including Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, "were arguing vociferously against natural rights," Mr. Rhodes says. "Their thing was that the constitutional rights were something archaic and an obstacle." Franklin D. Roosevelt enumerated his "Four Freedoms" in January 1941, including two natural rights (freedom of speech

and of “worship”) and one positive one (“freedom from want”). The fourth, “freedom from fear,” Mr. Rhodes calls “meaningless,” observing that fear is a “basic instinct.”

In 1944 FDR exhorted Congress to enact a “Second Bill of Rights,” all positive—including the rights to “a useful and remunerative job,” “a decent home,” “adequate medical care” and “a good education.” Four years later his widow, Eleanor, chaired the committee that drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads like a mashup of America’s real Bill of Rights and FDR’s aspirational second one. “They tried to have it both ways,” Mr. Rhodes says, by acknowledging that positive rights are “not the same as civil and political rights” while also insisting “they’re human rights.”

Mr. Rhodes is careful to add that he doesn’t intend his argument “as an attack on welfare states, or even on socialism.” Those arrangements are fine by him as long as they are chosen freely and democratically. What, then, is wrong with an expansive concept of human rights? For one thing, it leads to a kind of inflation that devalues natural rights. “The European Union, and its Charter of Fundamental Rights, says that the right to have free employment counseling is a human right,” he notes. That “equates something as banal as employment counseling with something like the right to be free from torture, or the right to be free from slavery.”

The corollary is that abolishing torture and slavery-or protecting the freedoms enumerated in America’s Bill of Rights-is no more important than employment counseling. Which brings us back to the U.N. Human Rights Council. Mr. Rhodes describes it as “controlled” by “Islamic theocracies” and “heavily under the influence of China.” Those unfree countries “are forming a human-rights vision of their own,” he says. “It’s human rights without freedom. It’s human rights based on economic and social rights, where freedoms are restricted in the interest of ‘peace’ and ‘stability’ and power-their power.”

That in turn has “instilled a kind of passivity among people” living in unfree countries, Mr. Rhodes says: “They expect that they can fix their society through human rights. But the human-rights system is impotent; it doesn’t have any teeth. There’s an illusion of ‘the U.N. is going to force my government to protect me.’ No, it doesn’t do this. So civil society puts all of its energies into this structure, which can’t do anything.”

The problem has worsened since the end of the Cold War, which provided the clarity of “an ideological battle about human rights,” as Mr. Rhodes puts it. The communists, like today’s repressive regimes, embraced “this fraud of economic and social rights, which provided this derisory standard of living” but was actually “a cover for their power.” Some Western diplomats argued in favor of natural law. And the Soviet Union and its satellites abstained from the U.N. General Assembly’s vote on the 1948 Universal Declaration because, Mrs. Roosevelt believed, they couldn’t abide Article 13’s provision that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own.”

Natural rights enjoyed something of a renaissance beginning with the 1975 Helsinki Accords, in which the Soviet bloc joined the West in pledging to “respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.” Helsinki included positive rights too, “but nobody paid attention to them especially,” Mr. Rhodes says.

“The importance of the Helsinki Accords was to stimulate civil society behind the Iron Curtain,” he says. That took the form of national “Helsinki committees,” whose members would go to international conferences for the purpose of “talking about human rights and embarrassing these dictatorial states.” In 1982, at the suggestion of Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, the committees formed an umbrella nongovernmental organization, the Vienna-based International Helsinki

Federation. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and Mr. Rhodes became the IHF's executive director in 1993. He held that position until 2007, when the federation dissolved.

His work in post-communist states could be dispiriting. "Some of the new governments-they didn't want NGOs around. They'd say, we are human rights; we don't need civil society to tell us what to do," Mr. Rhodes recalls. "But of course they needed criticism, especially with regard to minorities, and civil liberties as well. They needed to be observed and constrained in their policies." Among citizens of the newly liberated lands, Mr. Rhodes observed what he calls "the notorious mentality problems": "As a result of living under these communist systems, people are very subdued. There's a lack of-their panache has been removed from them."

The end of the Cold War felt like a victory for the free world, but in Mr. Rhodes's view it proved a "disaster" for the concept of human rights. The U.N. held its World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the same year he began his work at the Helsinki Federation. It was "a period of chaos," he says: "You have all of these ridiculous theories, like the 'end of history' and 'new world order'-and meanwhile, wars in Tajikistan and Yugoslavia and Georgia."

To which the U.N. answered, in Mr. Rhodes's paraphrase: "Let's call everything a human-rights problem." The Vienna Declaration concerned itself not only with natural rights and the familiar positive ones, but also with policing private conduct and attitudes, including crimes like domestic assault, civil offenses like sexual harassment, and "socially determined barriers," even "psychological" ones, that exclude the disabled from "full participation in society."

"The irony of it is, with the end of these communist regimes, their theory of human rights was victorious," Mr. Rhodes says. "The Soviet idea of human rights found legitimacy in the

international system.”

Can anything be done? “I wish that the Trump administration would talk about human rights once in a while,” Mr. Rhodes says. “They should talk about freedom.” He adds: “I think the only administration that really promoted natural rights was Reagan.”

Mr. Taranto is the Journal's editorial features editor.

IRAN: Appeals court date set for imprisoned evangelical activist

HRANA (15.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20GL7jJ>– Majid Reza Souzanchi, 34, Christian convert detained in Evin Prison, has received a summons order to appear before Branch 54 of the Tehran Appeals court on December 11, 2018.

He was tried on April 25, 2018, along with Fatemeh Mohammadi for “Membership in Evangelical Groups and Evangelical Activities”, presided by Judge Ahmadzadeh. Mr Souzanchi was sentenced to five years in prison and Ms Mohammadi received a six-month prison sentence on charges of “Engaging in Evangelical activities” and “Acting against national security through propaganda against the regime”.

A source close to the defendants told HRANA that Mr Souzanchi suffered from broken ribs as a result of being beaten up twice

during his interrogation by Intelligence Ministry agents. Souzanchi is also worried that his home was searched while he was in prison and some of his personal belongings and family photos were confiscated. He has written several letters [to the authorities] on the matter but has not received any response. In June, his prison cell was raided by agents who confiscated his personal belonging including a notebook in which he had written excerpts from the Bible.

Prison officials refer to Mr Souzanchi as “impure” and “Daeshi” (a member of ISIS). Mr Rostami, the Prosecutor’s representative, had told Mr Souzanchi and Ms Mohammadi that “if we were in your Christians’ hands, you would have executed us”. Samad Hadipour, the investigator of Evin court’s Branch 3, referred to the church as a “casino”.

Article 26 of the Iranian constitution guarantees religious minorities’ rights: “...recognized religious minorities’ associations are free [to exist]...and no one can be forced to participate in these associations or prevented from participating in one of them”.

Hassan Rouhani, Iranian President, during last year’s presidential election campaign stressed the importance of civil rights, and published a “Civil Rights Charter”. However, these promises have not been carried out.

Article 99 of the Charter states: “Citizens have the right to access facilities to participate in cultural life [of their choice], including the right to found associations, perform religious, cultural, and ethnic ceremonies as long as they

respect the laws”.

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IRAN: 208 years behind bars, 1554 lashes and 10 years of exile for detained Dervishes

Inside of Iran (01.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2vKf4bK>– Sentences for 39 Gonabadi dervishes have been issued by the Revolutionary Court. They have been sentenced to 208 years behind bars, 1554 lashes, 8years deprivation of social activities and 10 years of exile.

The sentences are as below:

Vahid Khamoushi: 12 years behind bars and 2years of exile in

Rayen.

Alireza Azadravesh: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes and 2years of exile in Kahnuj.

Ali Karimi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes and 2years of exile in Borazjan.

Ehsan Malek Mohammadi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes and 2years of exile in Zabol.

Ehsan Saffari: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes and 2years of exile in Zabol.

Arman Abolfathi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Armin Abolfathi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Morteza Sohrabpour: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Saeed Khamoushi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Mohammad Asad Samani: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Masoud Ali Madadi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Majid Rashidi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Amir Seyedi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Afshin Salimi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Amir Salimi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Mohammad Reza Abolfathi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Majid Amir Ahmadi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Hamid Reza Amir Ahmadi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Mohammad Reza Zehtab: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Ebrahim Allah Bakhshi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Nemat Kazemi: 7 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Babak Taghiyan: 7 years behind bars.

Mostafa Arman Doust: 7 years behind bars.

Mehran Asghar Zadeh: 7 years behind bars.

Amin Hosseini: 6 years behind bars, 74 lashes.

Asghar Samadyar: 5 years behind bars.

Amir Bahador Jafari: 3 years behind bars.

Meysam Azizan: 3 years behind bars.

Malek Rezaie: 2 years behind bars.

Ali Asghar Salari: 2 years behind bars.

Elyas Mohammadi: 2 years behind bars.

Mohammad Mir Ahmadi: 2 years behind bars.

Ali Bolbolie: 2 years behind bars.

Ashkan Kazemi: 2 years behind bars.
Mousa Fazli Pour: 2 years behind bars.
Mehdi Saadat: 1 year behind bars.
Hashem Avazeh: 1 year behind bars.
Majid Shaqayegh: 1 year behind bars.
Ebrahim Rezaie: 1 year behind bars.

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GUINEA: It takes a village: Ending FGM by creating new rituals

Rural communities in Guinea are creating new rituals that bring together the whole community with the aim of abolishing female genital mutilation (FGM) – for good.

Plan International (23.07.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2KIgmZs>– At the end of the afternoon in this rural community in Guinea,

Madeleine Bongui Camara's megaphone is heating up. And not just because of the sun.

A community facilitator from the NGO AFASCO (Accompaniment of Socio-Community Action Forces), one of Plan International's partners, Madeleine spares no effort to make her message resonate as far as possible.

"We are joyful! Joyful about abandoning this harmful practice for all women! We are happy and we are proud!"

Madeleine smiles, around her dozens of women dance and sing. This day is historic: after three years of work, the village will today officially celebrate the abandonment of female genital mutilation (FGM). Many discussions, debates and exchanges with authorities, religious leaders and the community cutter have led up to this point.

It takes a village to end FGM

The local cutter is also the centre of attention. Surrounded by dancers, who through song ask her to finally put down her knife, Nantenin Mara dances one last time with the blunt blade that has cut more than 250 girls here during her long career. A blade that, once the dance is over, is dropped into the village latrines.

A few minutes earlier, the mayor of the community, accompanied by representatives of the prefecture, Plan International and

AFASCO, formalised the big news in front of hundreds of gathered villagers.

“In view of the consequences of FGM, I am announcing the abandonment and total rejection of cutting in our community, and our commitment to do everything possible to extend this abandonment to the entire district! Do I speak for myself or for everyone?”

“On behalf of all!” The crowd answers.

Celebrating uncut girls

Faced towards the platform where the speeches are taking place and protected from the sun by a large mahogany tree, a group of a hundred girls stand out. All wear a white t-shirt with the message ‘An uncut girl is pure and complete’.

“It is the uncut girls that the village is committed to protecting from this practice,” explains Raphael Kourouma, from Plan International’s ‘Save girls from FGM’ project. “Today’s ceremony does not mean that the work is finished. Every village that gives up FGM is, of course, a victory. But now, the protection structures that we put in place in the village will ensure that the commitment is respected by all the community, and to act as needed.”

More than 2,000 girls have been identified as vulnerable to FGM and will be monitored by the community.

The role played by the Imam of the village in the abandonment of the practice was a key element in the process. From the beginning of the project, the imam was involved in discussions with the community and was a strong ally in the work to convince community members.

To symbolise the village's commitment to renounce FGM, a tree is planted in the mosque garden next to the main entrance. "We hope that in its lifetime, this tree does not see any girl mutilated in our village," the Imam states when planting the shrub.

For Raphael Kourouma, planting this tree here at the entrance to the mosque is a rare act and sends a very strong message. "All believers who come to the mosque must pass by this tree and will remember the words of the Imam today. It is a way of saying that FGM is not tolerated by religion. This is extremely important in our fight for its abolition".

Education and communication to end FGM

"Plan International used a gradual and highly structured approach based on generational dialogue, says Raphael. "The principle is to organise, over a cycle that can last more than a year, a series of separate meetings for men, women, elders and young people."

Each meeting is an opportunity to shed light on the issue from

the point of view of the target group. Exchange sessions between the different groups are then set up and then debated again in smaller groups.

The goal is ultimately to educate each group on why others are supporting or preventing FGM and to gain a common understanding of the consequences of the practice, the benefits of abandoning it, and the actions needed to achieve this.

Launched in 2007, Plan International Guinea's FGM project has worked with 19 communities to formally abandon female genital cutting, protecting thousands of girls from mutilation.

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ARGENTINA: Abortion Bill fails, but movement takes hold across Latin America

Analysts say movement's rise is changing the region in ways that would have been impossible just years ago

The Irish Times (12.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2M0gA00>– They narrowly lost the vote. But as supporters of a Bill to legalise abortion in Argentina began to shake off a stinging defeat in the Senate last Thursday, they took consolation in having galvanised a reproductive-rights movement across Latin America and began to consider how to redirect their activism.

A coalition of young female lawmakers who stunned the political establishment by putting abortion rights at the top of the legislative agenda this year seemed to be on the verge of a historic victory with the Bill. But intense lobbying by Catholic Church leaders and staunch opposition in conservative northern provinces persuaded enough senators to vote against it.

After a 17-hour hearing, the Bill was defeated early on Thursday by a vote of 38-31, with two abstentions. “We will no longer be silent and we won’t let them win,” said Jimena Del Potro, a 33-year-old designer who fought back tears as she spoke. “Abortion will be legal soon. Very soon.”

Despite the setback, many proponents marvelled that Argentine lawmakers had come so close to passing the measure, which

would have allowed abortion during the first 14 weeks of pregnancy and fractured the near-total prohibition on abortion in Latin America.

Demonstrators

The measure had already been approved in the lower chamber of Congress. Current law allows abortions only in cases of rape or when a mother's life is in danger. The Bill energised hundreds of thousands of demonstrators across Argentina in a women's rights movement known as Ni Una Menos – Not One Less – and enthused women from Brazil to Mexico.

“What Argentina did was mobilise young women and create the memory that we almost won,” said Debora Diniz, an anthropologist at the University of Brasília who helped write a petition now before Brazil's supreme court that challenges the constitutionality of its anti-abortion laws.

“They changed the way we talk about abortion,” Diniz said. “It's not just feminists, intellectuals. It's young women, your daughter, your sister.”

Ninety-seven per cent of Latin American women live in countries that ban abortion or allow it only in rare instances. Only Uruguay, Cuba, Guyana and Mexico City allow any woman to have an early-term abortion.

Priority

“Abortion rights was a priority and it will be deeply discouraging to have come this far and fail,” said Benjamin Gedan, an Argentina expert at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. But he said women’s rights advocates already had achieved successes, such as the passage of a law that seeks to have an equal number of male and female lawmakers.

“If we make a list of the things we’ve gained and the things we’ve lost, the list of things we’ve gained is much bigger,” said Eburne Cárdenas, a lawyer at the Centre for Legal and Social Studies, a human rights group in Argentina that favours legal abortion. “Sooner or later, this will be law.”

President Mauricio Macri of Argentina opposed the Bill, but said he would have signed it. After the vote, administration officials said they planned to ease abortion penalties in an overhaul of the penal code that will be presented on August 21st. Women getting abortions can be charged with a crime and imprisoned under the current law, although that happens very rarely.

The penal code changes had been in the works for some time, but they appeared to reflect Macri’s realisation that the reproductive-rights movement in Argentina was now an established force.

“The women’s movement mobilised all regions of Argentina; it was intergenerational and exceeded everybody’s expectations,” said Françoise Girard, the president of the International

Women's Health Coalition, which supports legal abortion. "The new generation of teenage girls who came out in such numbers will not be stopped."

Violent death

The organised movement that pushed the Bill started in 2015 with the brutal murder of a pregnant 14-year-old girl by her teenage boyfriend. Her mother claimed the boyfriend's family didn't want her to have the baby. A journalist, Marcela Ojeda, despairing over yet another woman's violent death, posted a tweet: "Aren't we going to raise our voice? They're killing us."

Her anger struck a chord. Within weeks, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators marched across Argentina, after organising on social media around the hashtag #NiUnaMenos. The slogan spread to neighbouring countries, including Mexico, Peru, Chile and Colombia, where it was used to denounce violence against women, demand reproductive rights and draw attention to related causes.

Analysts said the movement's improbable rise already had begun to change the region in ways that would have been impossible just years ago. The campaign is credited with inspiring debate on a variety of women's issues, including domestic violence, a subject that has long been taboo.

Ahead of the vote, supporters rallied in Uruguay, Brazil and neighbouring Chile, where they gathered in front of the

Argentine embassy in Santiago, chanting and wearing the green handkerchiefs that symbolised the movement. Many coupled their disappointment at the outcome in Argentina with optimism.

“When you undergo a process like this, you must keep fighting,” said Susana Chávez, an activist in Lima, Peru, who directs the Centre for the Promotion and Defence of Sexual and Reproductive Rights, a nongovernmental group. She said activists were already planning a march in Lima on Saturday.

Public outcry

The abortion debate in Mexico has been accompanied by a public outcry over violence against women and a renewed push for gender equality, led mostly by women’s and human rights groups. Last autumn, protests under the Ni Una Menos banner in at least five Mexican cities demanded an end to violence against women. The protests were a response to the rape and murder of Mara Castillo, a college student, after a taxi ride in the city of Puebla.

In El Salvador, which bans abortion under all circumstances, two Bills were proposed in Congress this spring that were pushed by women’s rights groups and their allies, opening debate on the issue for the first time.

For Argentina, the debate over abortion tugged at the country’s sense of self. It is the birthplace of Pope Francis, who recently denounced abortion as the “white glove” equivalent of the Nazi-era eugenics programme. But the country

in recent years has inched away from a close church-state relationship.

In 2010, Argentina became the first country in Latin America to allow gay couples to wed – a move the church fought with a vigour similar to its battle against abortion. Francis, then the archbishop of Buenos Aires, called that Bill a “destructive attack on God’s plan.”

‘Very emotional’

The church had many allies in the abortion debate, including women who spent hours outside Congress in the Argentine winter cold as the debate got under way on Wednesday night. Many expressed relief at the result. “It was a very emotional day,” said María Curutchet, a 34-year-old lawyer. “We were out in huge numbers and showed that we will defend the two lives, no matter the cost.”

Some prominent female political leaders also came out against the measure, including vice-president Gabriela Michetti. But Macri’s health minister, Adolfo Rubinstein, testified in Congress in favour of legalisation and estimated that some 354,000 clandestine abortions are carried out every year in the country.

Complications as a result of those abortions are the single leading cause of maternal deaths in the country, according to Mariana Romero, a researcher at the Centre for the Study of State and Society, a nonprofit organisation.

While the measure failed in the Senate, it made some inroads. Among the senators who voted for it was Cristina Kirchner, who as president had opposed legalising abortion. "The ones who made me change my mind were the thousands and thousands of girls who took to the streets," she said.

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IRAQ: Bride's killing shows new law needed

Iraq's new parliament should prioritize passage of domestic violence law

By Belkis Wille

HRW (08.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2B0o5Td>– The horrific case

of an Iraqi woman apparently murdered at home should prompt Iraq's new parliament, once formed, to finally pass a draft domestic violence law which has been pending since 2015.

According to Iraqi media and BBC Arabic, one day last week a bridegroom returned his bride to her parents the day after their wedding, complaining that she was not a virgin. Media reports claim that upon hearing the accusation, a family member beat her to death. Media reports say that police have arrested a male relative.

While the man will likely now face trial for murder, it is possible that he may benefit from a reduced sentence under a provision in Iraq's penal code allowing for shorter sentences for violent acts – including murder – for so-called “honorable motives.” But there is no “honor” in such brutal and needless killing. Moreover, the murdered bride would be just one of hundreds of women and children who suffer violence at the hands of their families in Iraq each year.

If passed, Iraq's new domestic violence law would oblige the government to protect domestic violence survivors, including with restraining orders and penalties for breaching them, and the creation of a cross-ministerial committee to combat domestic violence. It would also require the government to provide shelters so women at risk of violence have a safe place to go if they are forced to flee their home.

The draft law is not perfect. It contains several flaws, including a preference for families to address violence through “reconciliation committees” rather than prosecution,

and could be improved. Iraqi authorities should also set clear penalties for the crime of domestic violence, and close the loophole that lets abusers receive reduced punishments for so-called "honor" crimes, both not addressed in the draft law.

If improved, this draft law is the best chance Iraq's new parliament has to tackle the scourge of violence in the home, fulfill its international legal obligations on domestic violence, and save the lives of countless Iraqi women and children.

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IRAN: Prison sentence was

issued for “Payam Kharaman”, another Christian convert in Bushehr

Mohabat News (11.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20vQ6Uz> – The Christian convert, “Payam Kharaman”, has been sentenced to one year in prison on charge of propaganda activities against the system and in favor of Zionist Christianity through holding house meetings, evangelism, and invitation to Christianity and inclination to the land of Christianity. This Christian convert was among 12 citizens who were arrested in Bushehr (on Tuesday, April 7, 2015).

The cases of these 12 individuals with similar accusations have been under review until late April, 2018 while they were released on bail.

According to the verdict issued by Islamic Revolutionary Court of Bushehr headed by Judge Abbas Asgari, Payam Khoraman and 11 other individuals including “Shapour Jozi” and his wife, “Parastoo Zariftash” were sentenced to one year in prison, and they would be informed of the verdict on Wednesday, June 20, 2018.

The Christian convert, “Payam Kharaman” says to Mohabat News in detail about the case: on Tuesday, April 7, 2015, at around 8 A.M. – 8:30 A.M., 3 plain-clothed security agents came to the house, entered with a warrant, and rummaged throughout the house for 2 hours, and after inspection, seized computer case, mobile phone, flash memory, CDs, books and pamphlets and even

private photo album, and transported me to the intelligence office of Bushehr near Bisim Avenue, and they started interrogating me from the first hours of my arrival in prison and continued until the evening of that day.

One of the special terms cited in the case of these 12 Christian converts is "inclination to the land of Christianity", which is less common. Payam Khoraman says: interrogations were obviously indicating that they were looking for the accused's confession to communication with abroad, especially America, Britain and Israel, and this term has originated from this matter.

He said: "the pressure and harassment of the security forces on me began in early 2012, and I was repeatedly summoned by the Office of Police Monitor Public Place in Bushehr and interrogated about evangelism and communication with abroad, and I always insisted on the belief in Christianity for myself and not for promotion of Christianity. Because I had a boutique shop in Bushehr, a number of officers' family members in the office knew me and informed of heavy sentences against me, and the case which was under investigation by intelligence office. I thought it was just an empty threat, but unfortunately became a serious issue one or two years later."

Advocacy director of Article 18, Mansour Borji introduced the charges attributed to these Christian converts and the process of judicial review on their cases "as example of inquisition and the violation of the freedom of religion and belief", and he added: "Security agencies, following an ineffective policy in recent years, have tried to eliminate Farsi-speaking Christianity through unlawful pressures and false accusations in revolutionary courts and seemingly legal route."

While corruption, theft and embezzlement of senior government officials and their relatives are the greatest problem in the country, and judicial systems infected with the corruption do not have the ability to fight against these problems, the harassment of religious minorities particularly Christians have been mandated for the Islamic Republic's security apparatuses. Many Iranian Christians have preferred to abandon their homes in the last two decades and leave Iran to avoid the securities and judges.

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USA-CHINA: Hope for Sister Zou Demei: Lawyer files motion to reopen her case

Bitter Winter (13.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2nBFA2w>– Readers of Bitter Winter may be familiar with the case of Ms. Zou

Demei, a Chinese woman detained in Detroit and facing deportation back to China, where she will be arrested and probably executed.

Ms. Zou was until 2016 the regional leader of The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a Christian new religious movement banned in China, in the four provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, Chongqing, and Sichuan. This made her one of the top leaders of the CAG in China, and one of the most wanted by the authorities, with a substantial bounty placed on her head. As all CAG members, she destroyed all evidence of her true identity and went under the pseudonym of Yao Lu.

In 2016, Ms. Zou was informed that she was wanted not only as a leader of a banned religious movement, which was already bad enough but on trumped up charges of espionage, which might lead to the death penalty. She managed to escape from China with the passport of another person with her picture pasted on it and reach South Korea. Since South Korea, unlike the U.S. and Canada, has not granted asylum to any CAG refugee and it was unsafe for her to live there with a false passport, she decided to move to the U.S. She landed in Detroit on January 24, 2017, where her passport was detected as false and she was arrested.

Language problems prevented her and a few co-religionists who initially tried to help her to make her case understandable to the American authorities, and her asylum request was denied on December 4, 2017, with an order that she should be deported back to China. Her appeal was rejected on May 22, 2018.

At this stage, the CAG contacted several NGOs and instructed a specialized lawyer, Mr. Russell Abrutyn of Detroit, who took over representation of Ms. Zou and was informed that Homeland Security intended to deport her back to China after August 15, 2018.

Mr. Abrutyn has now filed a motion to reopen with the Board of Immigration Appeals, the highest administrative immigration court in the United States. This motion was based on new evidence that only recently became available thanks to the campaign by the international human rights community, a campaign that has drawn increased attention to Ms. Zou's plight. As a result of this campaign, the people whose lives she touched through her leadership role in China with the CAG recognized her picture (although she had known her under a different name) and came to her defense by corroborating her role within the CAG.

Also, Mr. Abrutyn explained, "the Board of Immigration Appeals has been provided with official government reports, which should have been but weren't provided before, highlighting the religious persecution in China against the CAG and its adherents."

Bitter Winter, who has led the campaign in favor of Ms. Zou, trust that, with the new documents, deportation to China, which would lead to her arrest and detention and most probably to her execution, may be avoided. However, Ms. Zou needs any help she may receive from institutional and private advocates for religious liberty and human rights.

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NORTH KOREA: Thousands of North Korean workers enter Russia despite U.N. ban

Moscow's approval of new North Korean laborers keeps cash flowing to Pyongyang and may violate sanctions, U.S. officials say

By Ian Talley in Washington and

Anatoly Kurmanaev in St. Petersburg, Russia

WJS (02.08.2018) – <https://on.wsj.com/2ny2s0n> – Russia is letting thousands of new North Korean laborers enter the country and issuing fresh work permits—actions U.S. officials say potentially violate United Nations sanctions aimed at cutting cash flows to Pyongyang and pressing it to give up nuclear weapons.

The U.N. Security Council in September barred governments from issuing new work permits to North Koreans, though some existing labor contracts were allowed to continue.

Since the ban, more than 10,000 new North Korean workers have registered in Russia, according to Russian Interior Ministry records reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. Meanwhile, at least 700 new work permits have been issued to North Koreans this year, according to Labor Ministry records.

The labor prohibition, part of a broad array of sanctions, is aimed at eliminating an important revenue stream for North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's regime. Most of the money North Koreans earn abroad ends up in government coffers, U.S. and U.N. officials say. Often, workers toil in grueling conditions.

Russian government records also show that some companies hiring North Koreans are joint ventures with North Korean entities, an apparent violation of sanctions banning "all joint ventures or cooperative entities" with North Korean companies and citizens. Many of the companies appear to be expanding even as they are supposed to be scaling down.

While sanctions have reduced North Korea's total labor force overseas, a U.S. official said, those numbers haven't fallen in Russia and China. "We don't want to underestimate the extent to which there may be serious violations."

U.N. officials are probing potential violations of the sanctions, which contain narrow exceptions, according to people familiar with the matter.

Russia's Interior and Foreign ministries didn't respond to requests for comment. In the past, the Foreign Ministry has said it accepted the U.N. sanctions.

Efforts to reach North Korea's embassy in Moscow were unsuccessful. A man who answered the phone at North Korea's

mission to the U.N. in Geneva said he had no knowledge of the matter.

China and Russia have drawn U.S. ire in recent months, accused by Washington of allowing North Korean illicit activity and sanctions evasion. Chinese and Russian firms continue to help the pariah nation import oil products in excess of U.N.-mandated caps, including through previously sanctioned tankers, according to U.S. and U.N. officials and a declassified intelligence briefing prepared for the U.N.'s committee on North Korea sanctions and reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

North Korean laborers have helped feed the construction boom in St. Petersburg, according to local businessmen.

"They work till they drop," said a contractor who hires North Koreans across the city. Workers arrive at construction sites at 7 a.m. and work until 10 p.m. or even midnight, taking just two half-hour breaks for meals of rice and dried fish, he said.

Local developers say they pay companies that hire out North Korean workers—firms they say often represent North Korean institutions such as the military or state conglomerates—about 100,000 rubles (\$1,600) a month per worker. In government filings and job advertisements, such companies list monthly worker salaries of 16,000 to 20,000 rubles.

That 80% difference is in line with U.S. assessments that North Korea's government takes the bulk of earnings.

U.N. sanctions mean these laborers should be gone by September, a year after they went into effect, because the workers are required to leave once their permits expire, usually within a year. Even workers with multiyear permits must be out by the end of 2019 under the sanctions.

Yet many firms contracting out laborers—Russian companies

owned and run by North Koreans, according to corporate documents and researchers—are investing in new offices, applying for new work permits and negotiating new projects.

“The Kim regime continues to dispatch citizens abroad,” said C4ADS, a nonprofit that advises the U.S. government on security risks, in a report released Thursday. “In doing so, it continues to flout international sanctions to generate foreign currency.”

About 100,000 or more North Korean laborers have been working overseas in recent years, the U.S. State Department said. Pyongyang’s labor exports earned as much as \$2 billion a year for the Kim regime, analysts say.

According to Russian government data, around 24,000 North Koreans were officially working in the country at the end of last year.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the U.S. envoy to the U.N., Nikki Haley, said recently that while Russia has helped pass North Korean sanctions, they questioned Moscow’s enforcement.

“We’re going to demand that every country in the world do their part,” Mr. Pompeo said.

Kuwait, Poland and other countries have said they have stopped renewing North Korean worker visas. The clampdown, along with other sanctions, is credited by U.S. officials with helping compel Mr. Kim to start denuclearization talks.

C4ADS has mapped out networks of firms and individuals using North Korean workers, mainly in Russia and China. Cross-referencing corporate registry documents, official labor statistics, tax filings and trade records, C4ADS said many firms contracting North Korean laborers from St. Petersburg to Siberia appear to violate sanctions.

One such company identified by C4ADS and examined by the

Journal is Sakorenma Ltd., which has employed North Korean workers since at least 2015 and whose ownership structure appears to put it in breach of U.N. sanctions.

According to Russian corporate documents, one of its owners is North Korea's General Corporation for External Construction, or Genco. The U.S. sanctioned the firm in 2016 for employing North Korean labor overseas, alleging that some Genco revenues are funneled into Pyongyang's Munitions Industry Department, which supports Mr. Kim's weapons programs.

Local Russian authorities on Sakhalin Island awarded this year Sakorenma two contracts valued at a total of \$180,000, according to public records.

Sakorenma and Genco didn't respond to requests for comment.

Genco appears to operate elsewhere in Russia through firms with similar names, C4ADS said. Some of those firms are seeking new permits for North Korean laborers, according to records reviewed by the Journal.

Zenco-39, a firm based in Krasnodar that was approved to hire 1,550 North Korean workers over the past three years, posted ads in late July seeking Korean translators. In Russia, companies must post jobs to see if locals are available before applying for permits for foreigners.

That firm was linked through C4ADS's research to more than half a dozen others using the same email address, physical addresses, directors or corporate names.

Another company, agriculture giant Yuzhny-Agrokombinat, obtained authorizations to hire 91 North Korean vegetable growers this year, according to Russian Labor Ministry data. The company is owned by Russian billionaire Vladimir Evtushenkov.

A spokesman for Mr. Evtushenkov's holding company, Sistema

Financial Corp. , said the vegetable company's North Korean workers were hired before the U.N. ban in September 2017 and fully comply with Russian law. He said the company doesn't plan to hire any new North Korean workers.

In St. Petersburg, the Journal reviewed copies of new work permits issued by local authorities to North Korean workers as recently as June. Those hires aren't reflected in Labor Ministry data, which indicate there were no applications for North Korean work permits in the city or surrounding region this year.

Three of the firms that received local permits—Mokran Ltd., Bu Khyn Ltd. and Kanson Ltd.—list addresses in a warehouse inside a dilapidated industrial estate south of the city center.

Neighboring businesses said the firms have been upgrading the facility. Several sought Korean-speaking translators in job postings in February and again in July.

When contacted about the positions, representatives said they were filled. Other calls to the companies went unanswered.

Some real-estate companies say they are aware of sanctions and are gradually winding down use of North Korean labor. But they said they were given no guidance by the government. Some plan to keep using the workers until the next decade, hoping Mr. Kim's promise to end weapons programs will lead to relaxed sanctions.

"They are like soldiers. They've got the discipline," said an executive at a large real-estate firm in St. Petersburg. "We want to keep working with them."

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