

# 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.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYT0pinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 18, 2018, on Page SR10 of the New York edition with the headline: A Too-Narrow Vision of Religious Freedom.

The editorial board represents the opinions of the board, its editor and the publisher. It is separate from the newsroom and the Op-Ed section.