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QATAR: In the shadow of the Football World Cup, the situation of Christians

In the shadow of the Football World Cup, a forgotten issue: the situation of Christians

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers



The European Times (08.12.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3Y620Jc> – In the shadow of the Football World Cup in Qatar, voices of non-Muslims have been heard and listened to at the European Parliament at a conference organized on 6 December by Dutch MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen under the title **“Qatar: Addressing the limitations of religious freedom for Bahá’ís and Christians.”**

This initiative of MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen, a member of the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief, was a followup of the resolution of the European Parliament on the “Situation of human rights in the context of the FIFA football world cup in Qatar” adopted on 24 November last plenary session. On that occasion, the Parliament called “on the Qatari authorities to ensure respect for the human rights of all persons attending the 2022 World Cup, including international guests and those living in the country, including for their freedom of religion and belief.”

The situation of the Christian community was addressed by Anastasia Hartman from Open Doors. Here is a large excerpt of her intervention:

“When we speak about Qatar, there are two distinct groups of Christian believers in the country and, consequently, two sets of challenges and limitations of religious freedom.

First, the indigenous Qataris, converts from Islam to Christianity, who find it, if not impossible, extremely difficult to practice their faith as they may face prosecution, oftentimes marginalization and pressure from society and family due to their conversion.

Apostasy and blasphemy, criminal offences punishable by law

Ninety percent of Qataris are Sunni Muslims. According to Qatar’s interpretation and application of Sharia law, apostasy

is a criminal offence punishable by death. The Penal Code also mentions as criminal offences “misinterpreting” the Quran, offending Islam or insulting any of the prophets.

It follows that Muslims in Qatar do not enjoy their inherent right and liberty to change their religion or belief, which is an important component of freedom of religion as enshrined in Art 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a binding treaty to which Qatar is a signatory. By its nature, in no circumstances, including laws, can this inherent right to change one’s religion be justifiably violated or broken.

But it is not only about the written law. Due to the huge influence of tribalism in the Qatari society, conversion from Islam is also seen as betraying one’s family and family’s honor.

Converts from Islam to Christianity and other religions are forced to hide their faith and keep their meetings secret to avoid dire consequences of either being prosecuted or suffer social stigma, police monitoring or intimidation.

Christian migrant workers, freedom of association and freedom of assembly

In Qatar, there is also a growing expatriate community of Christian believers (consisting primarily of foreign migrant workers), towards whom Qatar has been relatively lenient and has even provided land to build churches.

Expatriate Christians are permitted to worship within the confines of the Religious Complex located on government-owned land provided their community is registered but only nine Christian denominations have gained registration.

The Mesaymeer Religious Compound created by the father of the current Emir was a gesture by the Qatari government to promote interreligious dialogue and we note with praise that such a

step was made.

There are, however, certain issues. First, this complex is strictly monitored, there are ID checks at the entrance and no Muslim background visitor can enter its premises and therefore attend non-Muslim worship. Second, the complex is too small to accommodate Qatar's growing non-Muslim expatriate community.

At Open Doors, we know of about 100 Evangelical communities that used to gather in villas in pre-pandemic times but were "temporarily" closed by the government due to COVID-19 restrictions. They are still awaiting permission to reopen even though mosques and other establishments have been allowed to operate and the World Cup is hosting huge crowds of visitors from all over the world.

Unregistered religious groups are restricted from lawfully worshiping in private spaces. They have ended up in a registration limbo. It is extremely difficult to officially establish new communities or use non-designated buildings like hotels or event halls for religious gatherings.

We genuinely ask the Qatari government what they need to allow people to worship in other places?"

Recommendations

In her conclusions, Anastasia Hartman insisted on the need for a constructive dialogue with the Qatari authorities and prioritized a number of issues that should be advocated, such as:

- First, taking into account the limited capacity of the Religious Complex in Doha, to ask the Qatari government to grant freedom of worship to Christian communities, whether they are registered or not, and to permit free access to all Qataris and expats to Christian places of worship.
- Second, to ask the Qatari authorities to develop initiatives

at the local level for educating the wider population on the value of religious tolerance and inter-religious harmony.

On the same lines, she called upon the EU to address its human rights concerns, including religious freedom, to Qatar through its diplomatic and political channels, to use all the opportunities for a meaningful engagement, an open and constructive dialogue.

She also recommended that MEPs ask written questions to the Commission and meet with Qatar's ambassadors in their respective countries.

Conclusion of MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen



MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen concluded the event by saying “It was very impressive to hear the personal testimonies of church leaders that were expelled by Qatar for not hiding their Christian and Baha’i faith. This strengthens my belief that the EU should step up its activities for freedom of belief, also in Qatar. As EU member states do a lot of business with Qatar, the EU should not close its eyes for the lack of freedom for Christians and other non-Muslim religions. The EU should start a constructive dialogue with Qatar: anyone should be free to practice his religion and to express his beliefs.”

Photo 1: MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen chairing the conference on

religious freedom in Qatar (Open Doors)

Photo 2 : MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen

Further reading about FORB in Qatar on HRWF website

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