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WORLD: Aid to the Church in Need 2021 Report on Religious Freedom in the World

GLOBAL ANALYSIS

By Dr. Marcela Szymanski

ACN (22.04.2021) – <https://rfr.acninternational.org/home/> – While the loss of fundamental rights such as religious freedom can occur suddenly, for example through conflict and war, in many cases it is not an overnight event; it is often a process of erosion that occurs over years. Like individual tiles of a

roof being blown away one by one – or a few at a time – by increasingly strong winds, the observer ultimately recognises that there is no longer any cover, and he or she is exposed to the winds. These winds take the form of authoritarian governments, transnational terrorist networks, or fundamentalist religious leaders goading lynch mobs.

The reasons for the erosion of the right to religious freedom are manifest, but it can also occur as a result of the friction created by the introduction of new laws and regulations that, having identified religion as part of the problem, gradually force religious identities out of the public space. The state, as the guardian of the law, is obliged to enable the individual to “manifest his religion or belief in public or private”^[1], keeping the public sphere open for all religions, and for those without religion. Without these state protections, however, the inalienable human right becomes vulnerable, and risks disappearing.

Based on our evaluation of the country reports and regional analyses, a map highlights where the protections to religious freedom are almost all gone (countries in red); where these protections are under threat (countries in orange); and – with a new classification, “under observation” – where newly emerging factors of concern have been observed potentially endangering the individual’s right to freedom of religion.

Hindsight, regrettably, confirms the aforementioned observations. Signs of religious freedom violations observed in our 2018 report accelerated and expanded to the current situation, where systematic and egregious attacks are coming from governments, whether China or North Korea, as well as international terror groups, such as Boko Haram or the so-called Islamic State and other fundamentalist groups. These problems have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. States have used the insecurity to increase control over their

citizens, and non-state actors have taken advantage of the confusion to recruit, expand and provoke wider humanitarian crises.

The two-year period under review, however, has also revealed significant progress especially in interreligious dialogue, as well as the increasingly important role of religious leaders in the mediation and resolution of hostilities and war.

Extreme persecution (Map: countries marked in red)

Close to four billion people live in the 26 countries classified as suffering the most intense violations of religious freedom. They comprise just over half (51 percent) of the world's population.

Almost half of these countries are in Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa, populations have historically been divided between farmers and nomadic cattle herders, occasionally experiencing outbreaks of violence resulting from long-simmering ethnic and resource-based conflicts – more recently exacerbated by climate change, growing poverty and attacks by armed criminal gangs. Notwithstanding these, for the most part, communities and different faith groups have lived together in relative peace. Within the last decade, however, violence has erupted across the region with unimaginable ferocity.

This paroxysm of conflict released the pent-up frustration of generations upon generations of disenfranchised youthful populations who have suffered poverty, corruption and poor educational and work opportunities. These frustrations, in turn, provided fuel for the rise of armed groups including Islamist militants, both local, and more recently foreign – transnational jihadist groups engaged in a targeted, systematic persecution of all those, Muslims and Christians alike, who do not accept the extreme Islamist ideology. Over the last two years, jihadist groups have consolidated their

presence in Sub-Saharan Africa and the region has become a haven for over two dozen actively operating – and increasingly cooperating – groups in 14 countries, including affiliates of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. The development of these affiliates has occurred within an alarmingly short timeframe, and the pattern is familiar. Attacks by local criminal gangs, spurred on by Salafi jihadist preachers, progress from the sporadic and arbitrary to the ideological and targeted. In certain cases, a gang's efforts culminate in a sinister distinction – “affiliation” as a province of a so-called caliphate of a transnational Islamist network (**see the Africa Backgrounder**).

Millions have fled the conflict regions, either as internally displaced persons or as refugees into neighbouring countries. Serious human rights violations have been reported, with women and children often the victims. Millions of people in Sub-Saharan Africa face destitution, with the forced abandonment of fields and traditional small businesses. Starvation then ensues as armed groups impede access to humanitarian aid; women and children are enslaved, and the men are forcibly recruited into the ranks of the extremists. As evidenced in the country reports, in nations like Burkina Faso, according to the World Health Organization, by the end of 2020 more than 60 percent of the territory was not accessible to humanitarian aid workers.

Governments are either unable or, in some cases apparently, unwilling to address the issue. Considerably better equipped than the local armed forces, the jihadist militias fund their activities through kidnapping, pillaging, and the illicit trafficking of humans, precious minerals and drugs. Only recently have multi-national task forces been established to help the local governments (**see the Regional Analysis and Africa Backgrounder**).

While religious freedom in Africa suffers from intercommunal and jihadist violence, in Asia the persecution of religious groups stems mainly from Marxist dictatorships. In China and North Korea, which are the worst offenders in the red category, religious freedom is non-existent, as are the majority of human rights.

In North Korea, no fundamental human rights are acknowledged and the regime targets any group that challenges the personality cult of Kim Jong-un's rule – although the treatment of Christians is particularly severe. In this regard, the regime can be defined as “exterminationist”.

Of China's population of 1.4 billion, almost 900 million self-identify as adherents of some form of spirituality or religion, and state control is relentless. Mass surveillance, including artificial intelligence-refined technology, a social credit system that rewards and punishes individual behaviour, and brutal crackdowns on religious and ethnic groups, enforce the state supremacy. As the Regional Analysis reveals, “the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has one the most pervasive and effective state-run engines of religious control currently in operation anywhere in the world.” This is particularly evident through mass internment and coercive “re-education programs” affecting more than a million, mostly Muslim, ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province (**see the China Backgrounder**). Although there are approximately 30 million Muslims in China, including some 13 million Uyghurs adhering to a Sunni branch of Islam (**see the Fact Box on Branches of Islam**), rather than trying to protect fellow believers, some Sunni Muslim nations instead cooperate with the Chinese authorities by deporting back Uyghurs seeking refuge. Out of all UN member countries, only the United States and Canada have described China's actions as genocide.

Myanmar (Burma) has also, over the period under review,

lurched towards the worst crime against humanity, namely genocide. Ongoing assaults against Christians and Hindus in Kachin State have been cast into the shadows by a massive, multi-phased attack by the military and other armed groups against the mostly Muslim Rohingya population in Rakhine State. Systematically driven into neighbouring Bangladesh, an estimated one million Rohingyas are sheltering in camps and are subject to sickness, squalor, sexual abuse and murder. In contrast to China, the government of Myanmar has been ordered by the International Court of Justice to implement measures to prevent genocide, while an investigation proceeds.

Alongside religious restrictions imposed by Marxist dictatorships and military regimes, a grave challenge to religious freedom in Asia comes from increasing groundswell movements of ethno-religious nationalism. Perhaps the most explicit example of this is India, home to a nearly 1.4 billion majority Hindu population, though with significant populations of religious minorities including Muslims and Christians. With an underperforming economic sector and a need to bolster votes, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (or BJP) projects an increasingly nationalist vision intended to resonate with the majority population, namely that India is inherently Hindu. India is not alone. The trend affects billions in this continent, predominantly in democratic or semi-democratic contexts favouring the rise of the majoritarian religious nationalism in Muslim-majority Pakistan, Hindu-majority Nepal, and Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and Bhutan (**see the Mainland Asia Regional Analysis and the Backgrounder on Ethno-Religious Nationalism**).

Common to all of the countries indicated in red, but most evident in Pakistan, is the profound impact on the most vulnerable – women and girls of the “wrong religion” who are abducted, raped, and obliged to change their faith in so-

called forced conversions. As minorities and thus *de facto* second-class citizens, they stand little to no chance of obtaining justice and redress, despite the fact that they are victims of crimes punishable under common law. The rights of these girls and women are so comprehensively denied that they become slaves – sex workers and manual labourers (**see the Pakistan Case Study and the country reports on Nigeria and India**).

Severe cases of violation (Map: countries marked in orange)

1.24 billion people live in the 36 countries where full religious freedom is neither enjoyed, nor constitutionally guaranteed. These countries include 16 percent of all the people in the world.

Countries where conditions worsened, entering the classification of 'orange' during the period under review, are predominantly those which have passed laws which provide for unequal treatment of religious groups. Illusions of newfound freedoms in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolts in North Africa and the Levant countries (in 2010-2012) faded as governments increasingly applied already restrictive laws to assert their power, control the dominant ideology and tighten their grip on religious leaders. Nations such as Algeria, Tunisia and Turkey function as "hybrid pseudo-democracies" which allow for electoral processes, but strictly control who is eligible to run for office, how long they may remain in office and the ability to modify re-election laws to their benefit (**see the Middle East and North Africa Regional Analysis**).

During the period under review, President Erdogan put aside

Ataturk's laicism and introduced a neo-Ottoman foreign policy positioning Turkey as a global Sunni power. As exemplified by the conversion of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque, Islam is promoted in every aspect of public life. Internationally, Erdogan has pursued military interventions in Libya, Syria, northern Iraq, and in the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey has also sought influence, and impacted religious freedom, in Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo and Cyprus (**see the corresponding country reports and Middle East and North Africa Regional Analysis**).

In over a dozen countries which enjoy normal, even friendly, relations with the West, being a non-Muslim now carries a higher risk than in the previous period reviewed. States in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and the former Soviet countries and neighbouring nations, have passed laws aimed at preventing the expansion of what they consider foreign religions, and also barring "non-traditional Islam". Freedom of worship is guaranteed but not full religious freedom. For example, in some states, apostasy from the state or majoritarian religion is punishable – sometimes by death. In countries where conversion from the majority religion is not forbidden by law, it is effectively forbidden as a consequence of strong societal pressures. In many of these countries, proselytism of people belonging to the state religion is illegal. As the Middle East and North Africa Regional Analysis attests: laws against blasphemy silence minority faith groups; societal tolerance towards Christians continues to be low; and, as numerous incidents in Upper Egypt confirm, violence can erupt any time.

A positive development in the period under review is the rapprochement between Christians and Muslims led by Pope Francis. Following his meeting with the Grand Imam Ahamad Al-Tayyib of Al-Azar, the leader of the Sunni Muslim world, in 2019, the two religious leaders met again in 2020 in the

United Arab Emirates (UAE) to co-sign the Abu Dhabi Declaration on Human Fraternity. This papal visit to the UAE was marked by the first ever celebration of a papal Mass on the Arabian Peninsula. The 2021 visit of Pope Francis to Iraq – his first to a Shia majority country – will hopefully deepen interreligious dialogue and help highlight the dire situation of religious minorities in Iraq and beyond (**see the corresponding country reports and Middle East and North Africa Regional Analysis**).

The COVID-19 pandemic upended traditional practices around the world in areas such as health care, governance, and the economy, often with profound implications for human rights including that of religious freedom. As the COVID-19 Backgrounder reveals, in less developed areas of the world, the illness not only revealed underlying societal weaknesses, but exacerbated existing fragilities resulting from poverty, corruption, and vulnerable state structures. Terrorist groups and Islamist extremists, for example in Africa, took advantage of the government distraction to increase their violent attacks, entrench territorial gains and recruit new members. Pre-existing societal prejudices against minority religious communities also led to increased discrimination, for example in Pakistan where Muslim charities denied Christians and members of minority faith groups access to food and medical aid. In the West, emergency measures taken in response to the pandemic impacted freedom of assembly and religious freedom, prompting criticism and debate (**see the Backgrounder on COVID-19**).

Countries under observation (Map: marked on Regional Analysis maps)

A new category has been introduced in this report, countries “under observation”, where newly emerging factors have been observed which provoke concerns about negative impacts on freedom of religion.

This category is most tangibly illustrated through an increase in hate crimes, with a religious bias, against people and property. These range from vandalism of places of worship and religious symbols including mosques, synagogues, statues and cemeteries, to violent crimes against faith leaders and religious believers (**see the OSCE Regional Analysis**). A United Nations initiative to protect places of worship launched in September 2019 had no effect on violent demonstrations in Latin America where protestors in anti-government demonstrations attacked and destroyed religious symbols and property (**see the Chile Case Study**).

In what Pope Francis has defined as “polite persecution”, we observe the rise of new “rights”, new cultural norms created according to evolving values, which consign religions “to the quiet obscurity of the individual’s conscience or relegates them to the enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques.” For example, in the West, the right to conscientious objection on religious grounds for health care professionals in relation to issues concerning abortion and euthanasia is no longer meaningfully protected in law. Graduates from particular confessional universities are increasingly denied access to certain professions. Provisions for the right of religious groups to run their own schools according to their own ethos are also in jeopardy in several countries. These new rights, enshrined in law, result in an individual’s rights to freedom of conscience and religion coming into a profound conflict with the legal obligation to comply with these laws (**see the Backgrounders on “Polite Persecution” and “A Precious Asset”: the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief**). This dissonance has already had, and will continue to have, a

strong impact on over 84 percent of the world's population, who, according to the Pew Research Center^[2], describe themselves as adhering to a religion or belief.

ENDNOTES

[1] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", United Nations, 1948;

<https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

[2] "Religion: why faith is becoming more and more popular", The Guardian, 27th August 2018; <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next>

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