

Religious identity and power: preserving the status quo

By Mark Barwick, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (15.07.2015) - When the freedom of religion or belief has been violated, we typically think of actions that have been taken against *individuals*. This is the lens through which people of Western cultures tend to view human rights, since individuals are normally regarded as the primary right-holders in society. It is also individuals that are held accountable for infractions of the law or for criminal offenses.

However, many people are in prison or are otherwise sanctioned not for something that they have done or for something they believe in, despite the charges that have been made against them. They are there because of their religious or belief *identity* and association with a group.

The freedom of association is a hallmark of any democratic system. And the freedom of religion or belief itself is understood to include the freedom to practice one's religion "either individually or in community with others," as it is stated in Article 18 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights. It is this *community dimension* – that is present in most religions and that shapes profoundly religious identity – that can make governments and authorities uneasy. It can trigger actions to monitor, control and even suppress that community. And by implication, that means anyone who is *associated* with that community.

Religious identity can be viewed as dangerous. Much like ethnic or cultural or national identity, religious identity can shape one's worldview, one's ideas and ethics and even one's politics. Moreover, a religion or a belief is not always quiet and submissive. And this does not escape the notice of those who hold power.

Consequently, the repression of religion and belief groups is often as much about *power* as it is about any doctrine that is propagated by the group itself. Governments tend not to be overly concerned with religious doctrine; however, governments become quite concerned over any threat to their power or influence. Here is where religious identity and group politics become very important in understanding the restrictions that are placed on religion or belief groups. It is precisely because they are groups – and therefore perceived as potentially dangerous – that they can come under fire.

State repression of religious groups

It is too simplistic to say that because a prisoner self-identifies as a Christian that the person is necessarily there because of his or her faith. Or if a certain Muslim group is outlawed that it is the group's faith that is targeted. There is usually some threat to existing power structures, real or perceived, stated or left unspoken, that is present in the situation. A wide range of accusations can be evoked to justify state repression. Many are therefore in prison for charges that have little to do with their personal religious beliefs and everything to do with their *religious group identity*.

For instance, under Pakistani law Ahmadis are not permitted to *identify* themselves as Muslims. This is punishable by three years in prison. Ahmadis cannot even call their houses of worship "mosques," as this is a term reserved by law for *true* Muslims and not for any group simply posing as Muslim, as it is said.

In Iran, Baha'is have been designated as an illegal cult, a "deviant sect" that is plotting to overthrow the government and therefore needs to be contained. There are currently more than one hundred Baha'is in Iranian prisons. This includes seven Baha'i leaders, who are serving 20-year sentences for allegedly "disturbing national security," "spreading propaganda against the regime" and "engaging in espionage."

These are ludicrous charges. Like in many situations where undesirable religious or belief groups are accused of threatening state security or public order, even when there is clearly no threat of this sort in view.

Another example of this is the case of Michael Yat and Peter Yein Reith in the Sudan, two Presbyterian pastors who have been accused of "undermining the constitutional system" and spying. These are serious offenses, punishable by life imprisonment or even death under Sudanese law.

This is what happens when those who hold power are threatened by those who carry a religious identity that they consider a risk to the status quo. Presbyterian pastors are accused of spying on Sudan, Baha'is of plotting to overthrow the Iranian government and Falun Gong of doing the same in China. The list goes on. It is sometimes hard to know if these threats are genuinely perceived or if they are rather a sort of collective and politicised paranoia. In any case, the result is the same: the repression of elements that are deemed undesirable or even threatening to the political elite.

When groups become "undesirable"

In this light, it is appropriate to raise alarm over Russia's new law on "undesirable organisations," which went into effect last month. Similar to earlier measures taken by the Russian government, this law aims to empower prosecutors to label foreign organisations "undesirable" if they pose "a threat to the foundation of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, the defence capability of the country or the security of the state."

The first instalment of blacklisted groups has already been proposed by the Russian Federation Council. The list includes such "threats" as the Open Society Institute and US-based National Endowment for Democracy.

Anyone working for these prohibited groups could face steep fines or jail terms of up to six years. The law also applies to Russian organisations that receive funding or that cooperate with such foreign groups. The ministry of justice is responsible for keeping this list of "undesirables," which will most certainly include some religious organisations.

This is a very worrisome development. It is reminiscent of the Nazi regime that blacklisted not only Jews but a number of other groups it labelled "undesirable" and "enemies of the state," including some religion or belief groups.

Power comes from religious legitimacy

On the other hand, religious identity can also be a source of political power. A religion or belief group can benefit from the status quo and even contribute to the suppression of other religious or belief groups. For instance, some governments state overtly that they are defending the cultural and traditional values of their country when they suppress "unofficial" religious or belief movements within their borders. And on the sidelines there can be a powerful religious or belief entity cheering them on.

Examples of this include Burma, where the dominant Buddhist party has instituted severe restrictions and discriminatory practices against the Muslim Rohingyas as well as some Christian groups, and Russia, where the Russian Orthodox Church tries to impose a complete monopoly over the religious convictions of the nation and beyond. Atheists and agnostics are also targeted in some Muslim majority countries.

Governments may try to legitimise these actions as necessary for the defence of traditional values; however, another reading is also possible. When a religious elite benefits from maintaining the status quo, the presence of competing religious voices threatens to undermine its legitimacy and could ultimately mean a loss of power. Laws are then conceived to protect the religious hegemony of the power-holders, laws that limit basic freedoms of conscience and free association and religion or belief. Legal

prohibitions against blasphemy, apostasy and conversion to another religion can also be viewed as attempts to maintain religious legitimacy and the power that comes with it.

In many countries, the result has been not only the political and legal suppression of minority religion or belief groups but also the creation of a toxic environment in which these groups are forced to function. Hostilities are high toward Ahmadis in Pakistan, Christians in India, non-Orthodox Christians in former Soviet countries, agnostics and atheists in Egypt and Indonesia. These hostilities are often encouraged by the state and by those in powerful places, hiding behind supra-narratives that appeal to the popular imagination. The outcome is intolerance, xenophobia and hatred toward minorities – and the highest ideals of religion are negated.