

Protestants

Table of Contents

Protestants

Teachings

CHINA: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

Protestants in Prison in China

CASE STUDIES

ERITREA: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

Protestants in Prison in Eritrea

CASE STUDIES

IRAN: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

Protestants in Prison in Iran

CASE STUDIES

NORTH KOREA: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

Protestants in Prison in North Korea

CASE STUDIES

PAKISTAN: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

Protestants in Prison in Pakistan

CASE STUDIES

VIETNAM: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

Protestants in Prison in Vietnam

CASE STUDIES

Conclusions

The label ‘Protestant’ has been applied to a wide range of Christian groups. In Western countries it is popularly used for any Christian who is not Roman Catholic. This is because of the dominance of Roman Catholicism in the West and the need for a shorthand term for easy reference for the complex array of non-Roman church bodies that have emerged in the modern world.

The word Protestant first came into use when describing the 16th century movement in Europe that called for reforms in the Catholic Church. It was especially applied to Martin Luther, a German monk, who protested against

corruption and abuses in the Church and publicly appealed for the reform of a number of beliefs and practices.

Other reform-minded theologians and Christian humanists preceded Luther, such as Erasmus, William Tyndale, and Jan Hus. These figures raised similar concerns from within the Church in the centuries leading up to the Protestant Reformation. However, it was the reform movements of the 16th century that introduced the word 'Protestant' into the lexicon of Western religion.

Subsequently, the term has been used to reference any of the numerous Christian denominations in the West that do not accept the authority of Rome. They may call themselves: Reformed, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Evangelicals, Pentecostals or some other appellation. However, most of these groups would self-identify as Protestant. The distinctions between them often include differences in theology, polity and practice.

For instance, John Calvin was a French humanist and Doctor of Law, who envisioned a system of church governance by elected office holders, pastors and elders (*presbyters*). This *presbyterian* structure was established in contrast to the traditional *episcopal* system of the Catholic Church where authority resides in a bishop (*episcopos*). Calvin's teachings had an enduring impact on Reformed theology, which became especially influential in Eastern Europe, Scotland and the Americas.

Another Reformed leader was Ulrich Zwingli of Switzerland, who pressed for even more radical changes to be made in church doctrine and practice. Zwingli supported the creation of a theocratic state, where the Bible would carry authority in civil as well as religious life.

The Protestant Reformation faced substantial opposition from the Roman Catholic Church and from the European nobility that benefited from its favoured status with the Church. States and cities that sided with the Protestant movement became battlegrounds for increased religious and political autonomy, as some nobles perceived an opportunity for fortifying their influence in a time of rising nationalism while others supported the status quo.

After years of struggle and even civil war, many countries established state religions and granted tolerance to minority religions. The Reformation period had produced a range of denominations, each emphasising particular doctrines, practices, or church governance. The influence of Lutheranism and Calvinism had left their mark. Later, the Evangelical movement would also establish itself, stressing the importance of personal conversion, preaching of the Gospel, the centrality of the Bible and active evangelism. Additionally, the Pentecostal wing

of Evangelicals was formed, prioritising the experience of faith as opposed to just an intellectual assent to certain doctrines.

Evangelical revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries spurred a lively commitment to missionary work in foreign lands, often facilitated by colonial interests. The growth of European and American missions to influence ideologies of populations around the globe in the 19th century allowed for the most expansive period of Protestantism.

Today Protestantism has a worldwide presence, accounting for approximately one-third of the world's 2.18 billion Christians. Protestants are highly concentrated in the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa, with significant numbers throughout Europe, Asia, and the Pacific. They also constitute small minorities in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Teachings

Protestant teachings that are shared by Christianity in general centre on Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Redeemer of the world. The Reformation produced several defining characteristics of Protestant faith, including justification by faith (*sola fida*) through grace (*sola gratia*), the priesthood of all believers and the authority of the Bible over 'human' traditions.

Rejecting the authority of Rome, Protestants sought to establish the Bible as the ultimate source of authority. Many advocate the principle of *sola scriptura*, affirming the Bible's singular authority in all matters of faith and practice. Other Protestant traditions give the Bible priority as an authoritative source (*prima scriptura*), while acknowledging other influences that have shaped the interpretation of Christian beliefs. Prior to the Reformation, the Bible was available exclusively in Latin and therefore accessible only to an educated elite. Reformers worked to translate scriptural texts into the common vernacular and disseminate copies.

Tracing a middle way (*via media*) between Catholicism and Protestantism, the Anglican tradition has sought to forge a path that is authentically Catholic while adopting many of the changes brought about by the Reformation. Like Roman Catholics, Anglicans point to the visible and historic succession of the apostles as a source of authority. Regarding doctrines and liturgy, Anglicanism, in many aspects, more closely resembles Roman Catholicism than 'Protestant' denominations. The case is frequently made that defining Anglicanism as a 'Protestant' faith is not quite accurate.

Protestant liturgies vary widely by denomination. Lutheranism and Anglicanism have maintained liturgies most similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church. Along the spectrum of more Protestant-minded denominations there is a greater emphasis on preaching and a persistent differentiation to Roman Catholic beliefs and practices.

CHINA: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

It is estimated that China's population is around 1.4 billion people. Approximately 18% are Buddhist (including Tibetan Buddhists), 5% are Christian, and 2% are Muslim.¹

According to a February 2017 estimate by the US-based NGO Freedom House, 60-80 million people in China identify as Protestants. According to the State Council Information Office (SCIO) report *Seeking Happiness for People: 70 Years of Progress on Human Rights in China* published in September 2019, the number of religious adherents is about 200 million. Among these, there are 20 million Protestants affiliated with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), which is the state-sanctioned umbrella organisation for all officially recognised Protestant churches, according to information on TSPM's website in March 2017.²

Accurate estimates on the number of Protestants as well as members of other faiths in China are difficult to calculate because many adherents practice exclusively at home or in churches that are not state sanctioned, which is illegal.

Since Xi Jinping acceded to power in 2012, the believers of all religions have suffered from an increasingly repressive regime in China under the motto of 'sinicization'.³ Additionally, starting in 2018, all religious groups and places of worship have been required to register or affiliate with a government-approved association. Many unregistered or banned religious groups in China are considered 'xie jiao',⁴ which is criminalised in the Chinese Penal Code. Religious

¹ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: China 2019*, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/>.

² Ibid.

³ This word has been used since the 17th century to indicate the assimilation of minorities in the Chinese empire into Chinese culture and language. It was adopted by Nationalist China to signify the effort to replace the foreigners who managed business, religions and civil society organisations with Chinese citizens. However, the CCP gives to the word 'sinicization' a different meaning. It is not enough that organisations operating in China, including religions and churches, have Chinese leaders. In order to be accepted as 'sinicized', they should have leaders *selected by the CCP* and operate within a framework of strategies and objectives indicated by the CCP. Source: "HOME. Sinicization," Bitter Winter, accessed April 2020. <https://bitterwinter.org/Vocabulary/sinicization/>.

⁴ The expression of *xie jiao* is far from clear. It is incorrectly translated in English into 'evil cult', but in fact it means 'heterodox teachings'. This notion was born in the Ming period. What teachings were 'heterodox' was determined by the Emperor, and lists of *xie jiao* were based on both theological and political grounds. For example, Christianity as a whole was classified as a *xie jiao* in 1725, but taken out of the list in 1842, due to Western

or belief communities deemed to be ‘foreign’ or unauthorised are subjected to hostility, harassment and arbitrary detention by the authorities.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses high-tech surveillance tactics such as artificial intelligence to monitor and control religious minorities. Consequently, in 2019 alone, the CCP raided or closed hundreds of Protestant house churches. Additionally, local police harass and detain church officials who refuse to join the state-sanctioned association TSPM. Other violations of FoRB include offering cash bounties for those who inform on house churches, removing crosses from churches, banning youth from participating in religious services and putting pictures of President Xi Jinping in the place of images of Jesus Christ.⁵

Protestants in Prison in China

Most arrests of Protestants in China are related to the activities of pastors and evangelists belonging to unsanctioned (underground) Protestant groups. However, state-sanctioned pastors and TSPM churchgoers who resist the interference of the CCP in their internal affairs are also imprisoned on spurious charges due to Xi Jinping’s ‘sinicization’ campaign.

Protestants behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **19 cases** of Protestants in its Prisoners’ Database.⁶ In most of these cases, individuals were sentenced to between four and 15 years in prison, but three are serving life sentences. There were 21 cases recorded in HRWF’s database in 2019, 27 in 2018 and 29 in 2017.

There have been persistent allegations of torture, the absence of medical care, ill treatment, poor living conditions and being held incommunicado in Chinese prisons.⁷

Articles of the Penal Code

political and military pressure. Nowadays, the list of *xie jiao* (<https://bitterwinter.org/what-is-a-xie-jiao>) includes any movement that the Chinese government considers hostile to the CCP. Being active in a *xie jiao* is punished with severe jail penalties under Article 300 of the Penal Code. Sources: “HOME: Article 300,” Bitter Winter, accessed June 2020. <https://bitterwinter.org/Vocabulary/article-300/>, and, Zhangjin, Yao, “House Churches in Danger of Being Labeled Xie Jiao,” Bitter Winter, May 23, 2019, accessed June 2020. <https://bitterwinter.org/house-churches-in-danger-of-being-labeled-xie-jiao/>, and, “HOME: Xie Jiao,” Bitter Winter, accessed June 2020. <https://bitterwinter.org/Vocabulary/xie-jiao/>.

⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended countries of particular concern: China 2020*, 2020. https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/China_0.pdf.

⁶ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Protestants, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisonersdatabase/>.

⁷ United Nations, *Communication on the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism* (OL CHN 18/2019) November 1, 2019. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Terrorism/SR/OL_CHN_18_2019.pdf.

Prisoners are typically charged under this article of the Chinese Penal Code:

Article 300 which criminalises participation in a *xie jiao* organisation ‘to undermine the implementation of the laws and administrative rules and regulations of the State’. Punishment ranges from three to seven years in prison, with circumstances deemed serious automatically meriting the maximum seven years.⁸

Additional criminal charges against Protestants include:

accepting bribes and embezzlement; disruption of public order; illegal business operations and fraud; subverting state power through religious activities; buying and selling forbidden religious literature; subversion; and leaking state secrets.

International advocacy

The *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review for China* was brought before the **UN General Assembly** on 26 December 2018. In this report, there are numerous mentions of concerns regarding the CCP’s violations of FoRB. When providing recommendations, many countries advised the CCP to address these violations. For example, Australia said the CCP should ‘Fully protect freedom of religion or belief by ensuring Chinese law supports the rights of individuals to freely practise their religion’, and Canada called for the CCP to ‘End prosecution and persecution on the basis of religion or belief’.⁹

On 19 December 2019, the **European Parliament** adopted a resolution in which it condemned the hostility of the Chinese authorities ‘towards peaceful dissent, the freedoms of expression and religion, and the rule of law’. Indeed, it noted that:

[...] repression has intensified since the entry into force of the regulations on religious affairs in February 2018, which have restricted the activities of religious groups and forced them to act more closely in line with party policies; whereas under those regulations, public or even private demonstrations of religious and cultural affiliation can be considered extremist; whereas the new rules threaten persons associated with religious

⁸ “Criminal Law of the people’s republic of China,” adopted on July 1, 1979 and revised and promulgated on March 14, 1997.

<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/5375/108071/E-78796243/CHN5375%2520Eng3.pdf>.

⁹ General Assembly of the United Nations, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea* (A/HRC/41/53) May 16, 2019.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/G1914037.pdf>.

communities that do not have legal status in the country; whereas religious communities have been facing increasing repression in China, making the country home to one of the largest populations of religious prisoners.¹⁰

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) noted that in October 2019, the US Department of Commerce imposed restrictions on exports to 28 Chinese companies and organisations and that the US State Department announced visa restrictions on Chinese officials implicated in violations of FoRB. USCIRF recommended that the US State Department re-designate China as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for ‘engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom’.¹¹

CASE STUDIES

Pastor and wife sentenced to 14 and 13 years in prison respectively for protesting removal of crosses

In August 2015, **Bao Guohua** was arrested alongside his wife, **Xing Wenxiang**, and their son because the three of them protested the CCP’s policy of systematically destroying crosses on churches in the Zhejiang Province. Bao Guohua was the pastor of the Jinhua Christian Church, which is a state recognised church. He was also a member of the China Christian Council (CCC), one of two state sanctioned associations which oversee Protestantism nationwide.

In March 2016, the Yangcheng District Court of Jinhua sentenced Bao Guohua to 14 years in prison and ordered him to pay fines that, combined, reached over 94,750 EUR. Xing Wenxiang was sentenced to 12 years in prison and was ordered to pay fines that totalled 93,865 EUR.

Their son was sentenced to three years in prison and has since been released.¹²

Death sentence converted to life sentence

In 2001, the CCP banned the Evangelical South China Church (SCC), labelling it ‘*xie jiao*’. **Shengliang Gong** was the leader of the SCC and was immediately

¹⁰ European Parliament, Resolution on the situation of the Uyghurs in China (China Cables) (2019/2945(RSP)) December 19, 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0110_EN.html.

¹¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended countries of particular concern: China 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/China.pdf>.

¹² “China Cracks Down on Official Church Leaders, Religious Rights Attorneys,” Morningstar News, March 18, 2016, accessed March 2020. <https://morningstarnews.org/2016/03/china-cracks-down-on-more-official-church-leaders-religious-rights-attorneys/>.

arrested and sentenced to death ‘for launching attacks against the state’. However, due to pressure from international organisations, he was not executed. Instead, authorities claimed he had raped other prisoners and sentenced him to life imprisonment in 2002.

While in prison, Shengliang Gong has been tortured by authorities and refused medical assistance. His daughter claims that he has severe rheumatism and gastroenteritis as a consequence of being held in a very damp cell for the first two years of his sentence.

There has not been any news since 2013 when he suffered a stroke. He never received medical attention and was in very poor health.¹³

Pastor of unregistered church sentenced to 15 years in prison

Alimujan Yimit is a Uyghur Christian who was the leader of an unregistered church in Xinjiang. He was initially charged with ‘illegal’ religious activities, but, in 2009, those charges changed to ‘collecting and selling intelligence for overseas organisations’.

On 27 October 2009, Alimujan Yimit was found guilty despite pleading innocent and was sentenced to 15 years in a labour prison. His wife and two sons have been allowed to visit him once a month.¹⁴

ERITREA: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

According to July 2018 estimates by the US government, the total population of Eritrea is six million. There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation, but the country is estimated to be 49% Christian and 49% Sunni Muslim. In 2016, the Pew Foundation approximated that the population was 63% Christian and 37% Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox, with less than 5% of Christians identifying as Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations.¹⁵

¹³ “Evangelical Pastor Gong Shengliang Is Dying in a Chinese Prison,” Asia News.it, May 27, 2013, accessed May 2020.

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Evangelical-pastor-Gong-Shengliang-is-dying-in-a-Chinese-prison-28027.html>.

¹⁴ “China: Judicial Review Urged for Uyghur Christian,” Christian Solidarity Web, August 31, 2016, accessed May 2020. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2016/08/31/news/3239/article.htm>, and,

“Praise Report for Alimjan Yimit in China!” Open Doors USA, December 10, 2013, accessed May 2020. <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/praise-report-alimjan-yimit-china/>.

¹⁵ For more religious statistics, see United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report on international Religious Freedom: Eritrea 2018*, Office of International Religious Freedom, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/eritrea/>.

The country is ruled by a totalitarian one-party dictatorship of Maoist inspiration. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after 30 years of continuous armed struggle by the Eritrean Liberation Front. Since then, national presidential or legislative elections have never taken place.

The only recognised religions in Eritrea are the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Evangelical Church and Sunni Islam.¹⁶

Apart from the Lutheran Evangelical Church, the government has not allowed any other Protestant group to become registered. Unrecognised Protestants are subjected to immense religious persecution in the form of arbitrary arrests and harassment.

Protestants in Prison in Eritrea

Arrests of Protestants meeting in hiding are regularly reported, but there are no official charges or sentencing. Oftentimes it appears that they are not kept in detention.

Protestants behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **four cases** of Protestants in its Prisoners' Database.¹⁷ Of these cases, three individuals have been detained since 2004, and one since 2005. None of them have been charged with a criminal offence, nor tried in court. In 2019, there were five cases recorded in HRWF's database. There were eight both in 2018 and in 2017.

Since 2002, there have been many mass arrests of Protestants in Eritrea. In May 2019, more than 171 Protestant Christians in Asmara were arrested, and in August 2019 another 80 were arrested.¹⁸ It does not appear that they were kept in detention but, due to a lack of reliable and accessible information, nothing is known about their fate.

Articles of the Penal Code

In the majority of cases, Protestants and believers of other faiths are arrested and imprisoned without any formal criminal charges, trial or sentencing.

¹⁶ Christian Solidarity Web, *Eritrea: Freedom of religion or belief*, CSW everyone free to believe, September 2018. https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1447968/3175_1540636081_2018-09-general-briefings-eritrea.pdf.

¹⁷ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Protestants, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

¹⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Eritrea 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Eritrea.pdf>.

International advocacy

On 6 July 2017, the **European Parliament**'s resolution on *Eritrea, notably the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak*, calls on the Eritrean government to 'cease its interference in peaceful religious practices in the country; [and] recalls that freedom of religion is a fundamental right, and strongly condemns any violence or discrimination on grounds of religion'. This resolution highlights that:

[...] members of [unauthorised] faiths, and their family members, are arrested and imprisoned; whereas a resurgence in harassment of and violence against those practising religious faiths has been observed since 2016; whereas Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) estimates that, in May 2017 alone, 160 Christians were imprisoned in Eritrea.¹⁹

Presented to the **UN Human Rights Council** on 16 May 2019, the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea* listed FoRB as one of the most pressing human rights issues in the country. The Special Rapporteur in this report 'calls upon the Government of Eritrea to allow the Eritrean people to exercise their right to freedom of religion and to release those imprisoned for their religious beliefs'.²⁰

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) recommended that the US State Department designate Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for 'engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom'.²¹

CASE STUDIES

Pastor held incommunicado since 2004

Kiflu Gebremeskel obtained a Ph.D. in mathematics from Chicago University in the US and was a mathematics lecturer and department and faculty head at the University of Asmara in Eritrea until 1999. He then founded the Southwest Full Gospel Church and was a pastor there, as well as a chair for the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance. He also served on the executive committee of the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea, which is one of the largest Pentecostal networks in the country with about 150 house church groups. In 2003, they applied for formal

¹⁹ European Parliament, Resolution on Eritrea, notably on the cases of Abune Anotnios and Dawit Isaak (2017/2755(RSP)) July 6, 2017. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0309_EN.html.

²⁰ General Assembly of the United Nations, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea* (A/HRC/41/53) May 16, 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/G1914037.pdf>.

²¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Eritrea 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Eritrea.pdf>.

registration since home churches are banned, but they never received a reply from the government.

Kiflu Gebremeskel was arrested at his home on 23 May 2004. The police took the keys to his church and threatened his wife. He has been held incommunicado ever since his arrest and was never brought before a court. Prison authorities have not allowed his wife and four children any form of contact with him.

Someone recognised him at a hospital in late 2014, but that individual was not allowed to talk to him.²²

Pastor detained since 2004 without ever going to court

On 3 June 2004, **Meron Gebreselasie** was arrested at a police checkpoint at the border of Asmara. He is an anaesthetist and was the pastor of Massawa Rhema Church until his arrest. For two months he was held at the police station before being transferred to Wongel Mermera.

Meron Gebreselasie is still detained there, despite never having been formally charged, tried or sentenced.²³

Pastor imprisoned since 2004 without charges or a conviction

Haile Nayzgi is the leader of Eritrea's Full Gospel Church. On 23 May 2004, he was arrested at his house and was detained. Despite no formal charges being brought against him or trial, he has been in prison since his arrest. He has been moved to various locations during his detention.

His wife and three children found out that the government planned on arresting them as well in 2013, and so they fled the country. After a dangerous and long journey, they received asylum and are now safely settled in a new country. They have not seen or heard news about Haile Nayzgi since 2004.²⁴

²² "Eritrean church leaders still in jail 12 years later," World Watch Monitor, April 13, 2016, accessed May 2020. <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/04/4407264/>, and, "KIFLU GEBREMESKEL," Church In Chains Ireland An Irish voice for suffering persecuted Christians Worldwide, May 28, 2019, accessed May 2020. <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/kiflu-gebremeskel/>.

²³ "Eritrean church leaders still in jail 12 years later," World Watch Monitor, April 13, 2016, accessed May 2020. <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/04/4407264/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

IRAN: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

In July 2018, the US government estimated the population of Iran to be 83 million people, with the Muslim population at 99.4% (90-95% are Shia and 5-10% are Sunni). The government Statistical Centre of Iran reports there are 117,700 Christians. However, according to World Christian Database statistics, there are approximately 547,000 Christians.²⁵

Freedom of religion or belief in Iran continues to face serious challenges, in contravention with the country's constitutional guarantees and international commitments, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Converts from Islam to Christianity are systematically persecuted by the government. It is estimated that between 300,000 to 350,000 Muslims have converted to Christianity, all of whom are considered apostates by the authorities. Subsequently, they cannot join official churches and must instead worship informally in homes. They live in constant fear of arrests, detention and harassment.²⁶

Protestants in Prison in Iran

Muslim converts to the non-trinitarian Church of Iran are especially persecuted by the authorities. This is also the case for pastors and members of Evangelical and Pentecostal communities because of their missionary activities.

Protestants behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **19 cases** of Protestants in its Prisoners' Database.²⁷ Most of them are Muslim converts to the Church of Iran. In 2019 there were 28 cases recorded by HRWF, in 2018 there were 23 and in 2017 there were 16.

²⁵ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Iran 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>.

²⁶ General Assembly of the United Nations, *Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Report A/74/188) July 18, 2019. <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/74/188>.

²⁷ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Protestants, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database>.

There have been reports of Christians being sexually abused and physically assaulted while in detention,²⁸ and that Iranian prisons routinely deny detainees medical assistance or contact with their families.²⁹

Articles of the Penal Code

There is no provision under the legal system of the Islamic Republic of Iran permitting conversions from Islam, which is considered apostasy. This puts Christian converts from Islam at risk of persecution. Apostasy is not codified as an Islamic Penal Code offence, but conversion from Islam is punishable by death.³⁰ In order to circumvent the codification of apostasy as an offence, judges and prosecutors have reportedly relied upon **Article 167** of the Constitution. This article explicitly instructs judges to utilise Islamic legal sources where crimes or punishments are not covered by the Penal Code.³¹

Additionally, it is very common for Protestants to be accused of a criminal offence such as:

moharebeh (waging war against God); *efsad-e fel-arz* (corruption on Earth), which includes blasphemy and insulting the Prophet; promoting Zionist Christianity and anti-Islamic activities; disruption of public order; conducting evangelism and illegal house church activity; insulting and/or disseminating lies against the regime; acting against national security; and intention to overthrow the regime.

If a Protestant is convicted of missionary activities, they are usually sentenced to five years in prison. However, if instead they are convicted of acting against national security, they face ten to 15 years in prison.

International advocacy

During the 74th session of the **UN General Assembly** on 18 July 2019, the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic*

²⁸ General Assembly of the United Nations, *Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Report A/74/188) July 18, 2019. <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/74/188>.

²⁹ European Parliament, Resolution on the cases of Iran, notably the situation of women's rights defenders and imprisoned EU dual nationals (2019/2823(RSP)) September 19, 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0019_EN.html.

³⁰ Global Legal Research Directorate Staff, *Laws Criminalizing Apostasy*, Library of Congress, June 1, 2014, accessed May 2020. <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy/index.php#iran>.

³¹ General Assembly of the United Nations, *Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Report A/74/188) July 18, 2019. <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/74/188>.

of Iran highlighted concerns regarding religious freedom. In this report's conclusions, the Special Rapporteur recommended that the Iranian government:

(f) In accordance with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the Islamic Republic of Iran is a party, ensure that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of their choice, or not to have or adopt a religion, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching;

(g) Refrain from targeting members of recognized and non-recognized religious minorities with national security-related charges and end the criminalization of the peaceful expression of faith.³²

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) recommended that the US State Department:

- re-designate Iran as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom;
- impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the US under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience,
- and reauthorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the US.³³

CASE STUDIES

Protestant pastor sentenced to 8 years in prison

In January 2018, **Soroush Saraei** was found guilty of 'action against national security', proselytising, holding 'house-church' meetings and forgery. He was sentenced to 8 years in prison and is appealing.

³² General Assembly of the United Nations, *Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Report A/74/188) July 18, 2019. <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/74/188>.

³³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF- Recommended for countries of particular concern: Iran, 2020, 2020*. https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Iran_2.pdf.

Soroush Saraei was the pastor of the Church of Shiraz. He was arrested for issuing letters for students seeking exemption from Islamic studies classes, which led to the forgery conviction in his sentence.

He had been arrested previously, and, in October 2012, he was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for ‘acting against national security’ and ‘propaganda against the order of the system’.³⁴

Pharmacy student had heart attack while being held in pre-trial detention

Karen Vartanian, an Armenian studying pharmacy at the Arak University in Iran, was arrested while participating in a nationwide demonstration on 30 December 2017. He was detained for 17 days and lost 15 kilograms of weight due to the physical and mental torture he was subjected to while in police custody.

After his release, he had heart surgery in April 2018 because he has congenital heart disease.

Karen Vartanian’s first court appearance was on 28 August 2018, where he was accused of insulting and disseminating lies, disturbing the public opinion, attempting to form warrior groups against the regime, promoting Christianity and anti-Islamic activities. He was placed in temporary detention again despite there being no set date for his trial. He was denied bail even though he has a serious heart condition.

On 2 September 2018, he suffered a heart attack at the Fashafiyah Prison and was transferred to the hospital. His family were only allowed to see him through a window for a few minutes, and report seeing injuries on his face and feet from beatings. The prison authorities took him back to prison immediately after surgery, despite the doctor’s recommendation of 3-4 days rest due to his extremely poor health. His family have not been allowed to visit him during his pre-trial detention.³⁵

Four Protestant converts sentenced to 10 years in prison each

On 13 May 2016, five Protestants were arrested during a series of raids on Christian homes. **Yaser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie, Mohammad Reza Omidi** and **Yousef Nadarkhani**, who is a pastor, and his wife Fatemeh

³⁴ ‘Iran: 2 Christians given 8-year prison sentences,’ World Watch Monitor, January 10, 2018, accessed June 2020. <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/iran-2-christians-given-8-year-prison-sentences/>.

³⁵ “Charge of ‘Promoting Christianity’ for an Armenian student imprisoned in Iran,” Mohabat News, Iranian Christian News Agency, accessed June 2020. <http://english.mohabatnews.com/?p=4100>.

Pasandideh. Yousef Nadarkhani and Fatemeh Pasandideh were released the same day, but then Yousef Nadarkhani was placed in Rasht prison on 24 July 2016.

All four men are converts from Islam to the non-Trinitarian Church of Iran. They were charged for acting against national security because they were promoting Christianity. Additionally, on 10 September 2016, Yaser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie, and Mohammad Reza Omid were sentenced to 80 lashes each for drinking wine during a communion service, as consuming alcohol is banned in Iran. They are appealing this conviction.

On 6 July 2017, these four men were all sentenced to ten years in prison for ‘acting against national security by propagating house-churches and promoting Zionist Christianity’. Yousef Nadarkhani and Mohammad Reza Omid, who have been arrested in the past, were also sentenced to two years of exile after serving their sentences. They all appealed their convictions.

On 2 May 2018, they were notified that the appeal court upheld the original sentencing and on 22 and 23 July 2018, they were all transferred to Evin Prison in the capital, Tehran.³⁶

NORTH KOREA: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

In July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of North Korea to be 25.4 million. In a 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported that there were 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 800 Roman Catholics. The report noted that Chondoism, a modern religious movement based on a 19th century Korean neo-Confucian movement, had approximately 15,000 practitioners.³⁷

In 1910, Korea was annexed by Imperial Japan. With the defeat of Japan at the end of WWII in 1945, Korea was divided into two zones: the north was occupied by the Soviet Union and the south by the US. This was similar to the division and occupation of Germany in Europe. Negotiations on reunification of the Korean Peninsula failed and, in 1948, separate governments were formed: the socialist

³⁶ ‘Christians face lashes for drinking communion wine,’ Christian Solidarity Web, October 7, 2016, accessed April 2020. <http://www.csw.org.uk/2016/10/07/news/3286/article.htm>, and, ‘Iran: Notorious judge intervenes in court hearing,’ Christian Solidarity Web, June 28, 201, accessed April 2020.

<https://www.csw.org.uk/2017/06/28/press/3603/article.htm>, and, “Saheb Fadaee, Yousef Nadarkhani, Mohammad Ali Mossayebzadeh and Mohammad Reza Omid,” Article 18, April 8, 2019, accessed April 2020. <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/case-studies/4609/>.

³⁷ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea* 2018, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/democratic-peoples-republic-of-korea/>.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north, and the capitalist Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south.

Since then, North Korea has been a Communist state based on the '*Juche*' ideology of self-reliance. It replaced Marxist-Leninism as the fundamental doctrine of the regime imposed by Kim Il-sung, the founding father of the DPRK. The *Juche* ideology claims that the North Korean people are self-reliant agents who will realise the Communist revolution. In this Communist ideology, religion is considered the opium of the people and a superstition. In the *Juche* totalitarian ideology, there is no place for religion and its eradication is one of the regime's objectives.

Before the creation of the new state, there were 3,089 Protestant churches in northern Korea. They were all destroyed.³⁸ Since then, Protestants have been meeting in hiding at the risk of their freedom and their lives. According to the Database Centre for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) which has interviewed thousands of North Korean defectors and refugees for years, there were more than a hundred illegal underground churches in North Korea in 2014.³⁹

Protestants in Prison in North Korea

North Korea is often called a 'hermit state' because there is no independent civil society and no human rights organisations. This mindset of seclusion makes it impossible to collect reliable official data from inside the country. Only North Korean defectors and refugees can provide partial information when interviewed by the authorities of South Korea where they have found a safe haven.

Protestants behind bars: some statistics

There are no known cases of North Korean Protestants arrested and imprisoned for exercising their legitimate right to religious freedom because of the extreme secrecy and censorship of the regime. Only cases of foreign Protestant evangelists who have been arrested and imprisoned for carrying out missionary activities inside North Korea have been made public.

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **four cases** of foreign Protestants in its Prisoners' Database.⁴⁰ Three of them of South Korean origin received life sentences under charges of espionage while the fourth one, an ethnic Korean from China, was sentenced to 15 years in prison for 'defaming the regime, attempting

³⁸ "White Paper on Religious Freedom in North Korea 2018", p 105, published by Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), 2019, Seoul.

³⁹ Ibid, p 106.

⁴⁰ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Protestants, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database>.

to incite subversion of state power and providing aid and gospel to North Koreans'.⁴¹

Articles of the Penal Code

Espionage is the usual criminal offence used to sentence foreign pastors and evangelists carrying out underground activities in North Korea.

According to defectors, the majority of North Korean Christians detained in prison camps were arrested by the Ministry of State Security because they possessed a Bible, which is treated as proof of a political crime. Even foreign tourists visiting North Korea have been detained for possessing a Bible.⁴²

International advocacy

On 20 September 2019, a report about the general human rights situation in the DPRK was presented to the **UN General Assembly** by Special Rapporteur Tomás Ojea Quintana. This report recommended to 'integrate a human rights agenda in the peace talks'. The North Korean government continued to deny the Special Rapporteur's requests to visit the country throughout 2019.⁴³

Then, on 18 December 2019, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution (A/RES/74/166) expressing serious concerns about 'all-pervasive and severe restrictions, both online and offline, on the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion or belief' and 'in some instances, summary executions of individuals exercising their freedom of opinion and expression, religion or belief' in the DPRK.⁴⁴

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **US Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) recommended that the US government:

- re-designate North Korea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations;

⁴¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Deacon Zhang Wen Shi*, accessed May 2020. <https://www.uscirtf.gov/deacon-zhang-wen-shi>.

⁴² Jang Seul Gi "Intensifying Crackdown on Christians in the Sino-DPRK Border Region," Daily NK, August 26, 2019, accessed June 2020.

<https://www.dailynk.com/english/intensifying-crackdown-on-christians-in-the-sino-dprk-border-region/>.

⁴³ General Assembly of the United Nations, *Situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Report A/74/275/Rev.1) September 20, 2019. <https://undocs.org/en/A/74/275/REV.1>.

⁴⁴ General Assembly of the United Nations, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (A/RES/74/166), January 27, 2020. <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/166>.

- fill the current vacancy and maintain the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues as a fulltime, independent position at the US Department of State and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- and urge the North Korean government to grant international human rights monitors unfettered access to document human rights conditions, including religious freedom, inside the country.⁴⁵

CASE STUDIES

Arrests and sentencing of three foreign missionaries

Kim Kuk Gi was detained in Pyongyang in September 2014 and **Choe Chun Gil** near the Chinese border in December 2014. The two men are South Korean nationals. They were accused of working as spies for Seoul's National Intelligence Service, which they denied. North Korean state media accused one of the men of running an 'underground church' based in China and 'illegally spreading foreign information on USB sticks and SD memory cards in the country'. They are still in prison.⁴⁶

In 2013, North Korea held South Korean missionary **Kim Jeong-wook** on allegations of espionage. He was given a life sentence of hard labour.⁴⁷

North Korea has occasionally detained South Korean nationals in the past on accusations of spying in what outside experts say are attempts to pressure Seoul or raise North Korean citizen's hostility toward the South.

Additionally, the DPRK has arrested other foreigners who have since been released. Below are some examples:

In November 2010, Jun Yong-su, a Korean American from California, was arrested for alleged unauthorised missionary work during several business trips to the country. He was released six months later on humanitarian grounds.⁴⁸

In November 2012, the American missionary Kenneth Bae was arrested after being charged by the North Korean government of trying to bring down the state.

⁴⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: North Korea, 2020*, 2020.

<https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/North%20Korea.pdf>.

⁴⁶ "S. Korea demands release of pair North accuses of spying," Al Jazeera, March 26, 2015, accessed June 2020. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/26/s-korea-demands-release-of-pair-north-accuses-of-spying.html>.

⁴⁷ "The lessons of Kim Jong-Wook," World Watch Monitor, June 20, 2014, accessed June 2020. <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/06/the-lessons-of-kim-jong-wook/>.

⁴⁸ "North Korea Releases US Citizen Eddie Jun Yong-Su," BBC News. BBC, May 28, 2011, accessed June 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13583136>.

Bae, a tour operator, was accused of committing ‘hostile acts’ against North Korea. He was released two years later.⁴⁹

On 16 February 2014, John Alexander Short, a Hong Kong-based Australian Christian missionary, was arrested for unauthorised religious activity and released 15 days later.⁵⁰

In February 2015, a South Korean-born Canadian pastor, Hyeon Soo Lim, was arrested during a humanitarian mission. In December 2015, Pyongyang sentenced him to life with hard labour for crimes against the North Korean regime. In August 2017, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sent a Canadian international government delegation to Pyongyang to discuss the case. Hyeon Soo Lim was released from detention on 9 August 2017.⁵¹

Deacon sentenced to 15 years in prison

Deacon **Jang Moon Seok**, also known by his Chinese name, **Zhang Wen Shi**,⁵² is an ethnically Korean Chinese citizen who lived in Changbai, China. Changbai is on the border between China and North Korea, and so Jang Moon Seok worked alongside Pastor Han Chung-Ryeol ministering to North Koreans who crossed the border into China.

It is illegal to cross into China without permission, but North Koreans often do so to purchase goods for reselling, to buy medicine, and to conduct business.

Jang Moon Seok regularly hosted North Koreans who were only in China for a few days or weeks before returning to North Korea. He saw welcoming these strangers as his Christian duty. He also shared about his faith to those who were curious or willing.

Consequently, some of these North Koreans became Christians, which a few returning to his home repeatedly for Bible training. Jang Moon Seok and Pastor Han also taught them how to share their faith with loved ones.

⁴⁹ Gladstone, Rick, “Kenneth Bae, Longest-Held U.S. Prisoner of North Korea, Reveals Details of Ordeal,” The New York Times, May 2, 2016, accessed April 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/world/asia/kenneth-bae-longest-held-us-prisoner-of-north-korea-reveals-details-of-ordeal.html>.

⁵⁰ “Profile John A. Short: Australian Missionary Detained by DPRK,” North Korea News, January 8, 2020, accessed May 2020.

<https://www.nknews.org/2014/02/profile-john-a-short-australian-missionary-detained-by-dprk/>.

⁵¹ Kassam, Ashifa, “‘It’s a Miracle for Me to Be Here’: Freed Canadian Pastor Speaks of Ordeal in North Korean Prison,” The Guardian News and Media, August 14, 2017, accessed June 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/14/north-korea-canada-pastor-hyeon-soo-lim-pyongyang>.

⁵² Religious prisoner of conscience adopted by USCIRF Advocate James W. Carr.

In November 2014, Jang Moon Seok was kidnapped, taken across the border, and placed in a North Korean prison. In February 2016, Pastor Han was brutally stabbed to death in Changbai.

Jang Moon Seok was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for his ministry work.⁵³

PAKISTAN: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

In July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of Pakistan to be 207.9 million. According to the provisional results of a national census conducted in 2017, 96% of the population is Muslim. According to the 2014 government registration documents cited by the press, there are approximately 1.4 million Hindus and 1.3 million Christians.⁵⁴

In 1956, Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic. Islam is still the official state religion, but the Constitution protects religious freedom by banning faith-based discrimination and upholding the right to religious practice and education. However, in practice, the state's blasphemy laws have created a hostile environment and incited mob violence that targets members of minority religious groups such as Protestants.⁵⁵

Blasphemy laws have created 'a culture of impunity for violent attacks following accusations',⁵⁶ as some religious fanatics believe that they are entitled to take the law into their own hands. There have been many instances where the local administration and police have either colluded with perpetrators or have stood by and done nothing to assist the accused out of fear of the crowd.

Additionally, the use of blasphemy laws has become a quick way of resolving conflicts arising from business rivalry, honour disputes, and disagreements over money and property. These laws have been instrumentalised for private settlement of scores in many cases. The accused are often lynched or killed by mobs before authorities can place them under arrest.

⁵³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Deacon Zhang Wen Shi*, accessed April 2020. <https://www.uscirtf.gov/deacon-zhang-wen-shi>.

⁵⁴ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Pakistan 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>.

⁵⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF- Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Pakistan is second only to Iran in its deviation from international law principles with its blasphemy laws, as well as in the severity of penalties for those convicted under them.⁵⁷

Protestants in Prison in Pakistan

All Protestants in prison have been victims of Pakistan's blasphemy laws which are used and abused to persecute non-Muslim minorities and to settle private disputes.

Protestants behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **31 cases** of Protestants in its Prisoners' Database.⁵⁸ All of these individuals were either convicted of or charged with blasphemy. Ten of them were sentenced to death, seven received a life sentence, two were given six years in prison and in 12 cases the sentences are unknown or they are awaiting trial.

It is common for there to be a lengthy delay with trials related to blasphemy as these cases are often moved between judges and lawyers are too afraid to defend the accused. This is unsurprising considering the pressure placed by radical and violent religious groups on judges to convict, and the hostile targeting of lawyers and politicians alike.⁵⁹ In the past, judges have been attacked for acquitting blasphemy defendants and two politicians who discussed reforming the legislation have been shot dead.

Articles of the Penal Code

Prisoners are typically charged under the blasphemy laws in the Pakistani Penal Code:

Section 295-A: 'Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs. Whoever, with malicious and deliberate intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of the citizens of Pakistan, by words, either spoken or written or by visible representations, insults or attempts to insult the religion or religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, or with fine, or with both'.

⁵⁷ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Respecting rights? Measuring the World's blasphemy Laws*, April 7, 2016. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Protestants, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisonersdatabase/>.

⁵⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

Section 295-B: ‘Defiling the Holy Qur’an. Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur’an or of an extract there from or used it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life’.

Section 295-C: ‘Use of derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet. Whoever, by words either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (peace upon him) shall be punished by death and shall also be liable to fine’.⁶⁰

In the last 20 years, Pakistani authorities have not executed individuals sentenced to death on blasphemy charges;⁶¹ instead they are incarcerated indefinitely.

International advocacy

In a resolution dated 15 June 2017 concerning human rights defenders and the death penalty in Pakistan, the **European Parliament** stated that it:

Is deeply concerned at the continued use of the ‘blasphemy law’, and believes this is heightening the climate of religious intolerance; notes the findings of the Supreme Court of Pakistan that individuals accused of ‘blasphemy’ ‘suffer beyond proportion or repair’ in the absence of adequate safeguards against misapplication or misuse of such laws; calls, therefore, on the Pakistani Government to repeal Sections 295-A, 295-B and 295-C of the Penal Code, and to put in place effective procedural and institutional safeguards to prevent the misuse of ‘blasphemy’ charges; calls also on the government to take a stronger position in condemning vigilantism towards alleged ‘blasphemers’.⁶²

On 19 January 2018, the **European Commission** released a report for the European Parliament and Council regarding *The EU Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance ('GSP+') assessment of Pakistan covering the period 2016 – 2017*. In this report, the European Commission raised concerns about Pakistan’s blasphemy laws being used to persecute individuals on religious grounds several times, and the state of

⁶⁰ Pakistani Penal Code <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/1860/actXLVof1860.html>, and, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/49b920582.pdf>.

⁶¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

⁶² European Parliament, Resolution on Pakistan, notably the situation of human rights defenders and the death penalty (2017/2723(RSP)) June 15, 2017. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0268_EN.html.

religious freedom in Pakistan more broadly. The European Commission stated that:

Pakistan is requested to follow up on the recommendation to repeal all blasphemy laws or to amend them in compliance with the strict requirements of the Covenant; and to ensure the investigation and prosecution of those involved in incitement of or engagement in violent acts against others based on allegations of blasphemy.⁶³

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** recommended that the US State Department designate Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for ‘engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom’. Despite being listed as a CPC in 2019, the US State Department waived Pakistan from any sanctions due to “‘important national interest of the United States’”. USCIRF recommended that this waiver is rescinded in 2020 in light of the extreme abuses of religious freedom in Pakistan.⁶⁴

USCIRF also recommended that the Pakistani government:

- release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
- repeal the blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until repeal is accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing Penal Code articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations.

CASE STUDIES

Mentally ill British Pakistani shot by guard while serving sentence

Muhammad Asghar, a British Protestant, was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in 2010 and sectioned for a month in a mental hospital in Scotland. A few months later, he travelled to Pakistan with his wife because they manage three properties there. His five children, all adults, were opposed to this trip but he left without their knowledge.

⁶³ European Commission, The EU Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance ('GSP+') assessment of Pakistan covering the period 2016 -2017, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (SWD (2018, 29 final), January 1, 2018. https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/january/tradoc_156544.pdf.

⁶⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

In September 2010, Muhammad Asghar was accused of blasphemy by one of their tenants who alleged that he had written letters claiming to be a prophet. Despite his history of mental illness, the Pakistani court did not accept UK medical reports and sentenced him to death. While in prison he attempted suicide, and it was only then that a judge ordered a mental health report. However, a mob formed outside of the hospital during his exam, threatening both him and the doctors performing the evaluation. The doctors, fearing for their lives, diagnosed him with depression instead of paranoid schizophrenia.

In 2012, one of Muhammad Asghar's daughters visited him in prison and reported that his mental health had severely deteriorated.

In September 2014, a police officer shot Muhammad Asghar in the back while he was in his prison cell. He survived.⁶⁵

Cousins tortured during interrogation, one jumped out of a window

In February 2018, **Patras Masih** and **Sajjad Masih**, cousins, were both arrested for blasphemy. Patras Masih was accused of posting a sacrilegious photo to a Facebook group in January and, during interrogation by the authorities where he was beaten, mentioned showing his cousin the photo.

When Sajjad Masih was brought in for questioning, the authorities tortured them and then tried to force Sajjad Masih to have sex with his cousin in the police headquarters. He jumped from the 4th floor of the building to escape and was critically injured. He has since recovered.

They are both still in prison, awaiting trial.⁶⁶

Mob torches over 200 Christian-owned properties due to one man's alleged blasphemy

On 8 March 2013, **Sawan Masih**, a Protestant, got into a dispute with Shahid Imran, a Muslim, who claimed that Sawan Masih insulted Islam. A few days later, over 3,000 Muslims attacked Sawan Masih's house and set fire to 180 Christian-owned homes, 75 shops and two churches in his neighbourhood, Joseph Colony. Hundreds of families were forced to flee. Later, a court released 133 Muslim suspects without any charges for this violence and destruction.

⁶⁵ "Family of Mohammad Asghar: 'We Just Want Our Father Home'," The Guardian News and Media, October 4, 2014, accessed May 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/04/family-mohammad-asghar-pakistan-blasphemy-laws>.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Monitor, *A Report on the Religious Minorities in Pakistan, covering incidents of 2018*, National Commission for Justice and Peace, 2019. <http://www.ncjp-pk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/HRM19-final.pdf>.

In 2014, Sawan Masih was sentenced to death and fined 200,000 rupees (approximately 1,500 EUR). His trial was held in prison because there was such a high risk of Islamist attacks otherwise. He pled innocent, claiming that these allegations are part of a plan to drive Christians from Joseph Colony.

Sawan Masih appealed his sentencing. His final court date was set for 13 February 2020, but the hearing was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

He was a street sweeper and has a wife and three children. His wife visited him in February and reported that he seemed to be okay.⁶⁷

VIETNAM: Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants

As of July 2018, the total population of Vietnam was estimated to be 97 million. According to statistics released by Vietnam's Government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), 26.4% of the population are religious believers: 14.91% identify as Buddhist, 7.35% as Roman Catholic, 1.09% as Protestant, 1.16% as Cao Dai, and 1.47% as Hoa Hao Buddhist.⁶⁸

Vietnam's Constitution stipulates that the government must defend and respect the freedom of religion or belief for all citizens. However, religious teachings are considered incompatible with communist ideology, and any form of assembly is perceived as a threat to the Communist Party's monopoly of power. Consequently, all religious groups are under strict surveillance and control by the Communist Party.

To that end, Vietnam's Law on Belief and Religion went into effect on 1 January 2018. This law, which requires religious groups to formally register with the government, has been used by authorities as justification for persecuting religious minorities, including Protestants. There are reports of authorities:

harassing church members and leaders; refusing to issue identity documents which effectively leaves members stateless; raiding and

⁶⁷ Khan, Jibrán, "Christian Sentenced to Death for Blasphemy, Islamabad Bishop Calls for Prayers for the Persecuted," PAKISTAN, March 28, 2014, accessed June 2020. <http://asianews.it/news-en/Christian-sentenced-to-death-for-blasphemy-Islamabad-bishop-callsforprayersforthe-persecuted-30684.html>, and,

"PAKISTAN: Three Christians Sentenced to Death for Blasphemy," Church In Chains Ireland An Irish voice for suffering persecuted Christians Worldwide, April 7, 2014, accessed June 2020. <https://www.churchinchains.ie/news-by-country/south-asia/pakistan/pakistan-three-christians-sentenced-to-death-for-blasphemy/>.

⁶⁸ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Vietnam 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/vietnam/>.

shutting down churches; detaining members who attended overseas conferences or spoke to foreign officials; destroying or expropriating property or places of worship; exerting pressure on members to renounce their faith; and arresting and detaining religious leaders.⁶⁹

Members of the Montagnard ethnic group are especially targeted and are often sentenced to lengthy prison terms on the grounds of allegedly undermining the national unity policy. Montagnards are indigenous peoples living in the Central Highlands of Vietnam who were favoured under French colonial rule and then became close allies for American soldiers during the Vietnam War. Due to evangelising missionaries and exposure to American troops, many of them converted to Christianity. Now, it is estimated that over half a million Montagnards are Protestant Christians.⁷⁰ The Vietnamese authorities perceive this ethno-religious group as a potential threat to the territorial integrity and the security of the country due to this historical and cultural background.

Protestants in Prison in Vietnam

In Vietnam, only religious organisations that are state-sanctioned are allowed to operate. Pastors and believers of Evangelical and Pentecostal house churches that are not state-sanctioned can be arrested at any time and charged with spurious offences such as: disruption of public order, undermining state security, illegally operating a business or leaking state secrets.

Protestants behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **14 cases** of Protestants in its Prisoners' Database.⁷¹ These individuals were all sentenced to between five to 17 years in prison. They are all Montagnards and five are Evangelical pastors. In 2019 there were 24 cases recorded in HRWF's database, in 2018 there were 27 and in 2017 there were 32.

There have been reports of religious prisoners experiencing torture during pretrial detention and imprisonment, as well as poor living conditions in prisons and suspicious deaths occurring while in custody.⁷²

⁶⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Vietnam 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Vietnam.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Southerland, Dan, "Say a Prayer for Vietnam's Forgotten Montagnards," *Asia Times*, October 13, 2018, accessed June 2020. <https://asiatimes.com/2018/10/say-a-prayer-for-vietnams-forgotten-montagnards/>.

⁷¹ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Protestants, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisonersdatabase/>.

⁷² "UN Live United Nations Web TV - Search Results for 'VietNam' - Consideration of Viet Nam (Cont'd) - 3581st Meeting, 125th Session of Human Rights Committee," United Nations, March 12, 2019. <http://webtv.un.org/search/consideration-of-viet-nam-contd-3581st-meeting-125th-session-of-human-rights-committee/6013104672001/?term=viet%20nam&lan=english&sort=date>.

Articles of the Penal Code

Prisoners are typically charged under this Article of the Vietnamese Criminal Code:

Article 87 which is ‘undermining the unity policy’.⁷³

Additionally, one of the Protestants in HRWF’s Prisoners’ Database was charged under **Article 275**, which includes ‘organizing and/or coercing other persons to flee abroad or stay abroad illegally’.⁷⁴

International advocacy

In its November 2018 resolution on Vietnam, the **European Parliament** noted that religious freedom is repressed in the country and non-registered religions, such as Protestant churches and ethnic minority Montagnards, ‘continue to suffer severe religious persecution’. It called on the government to ‘remove all restrictions on freedom of religion and to put an end to the harassment of religious communities’. It further urged the government to bring its legislation in conformity with international human rights standards and obligations.⁷⁵

On 12 March 2019, the **UN Human Rights Committee** held a review of Vietnam’s fulfilment of its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In the Committee’s concluding observations, it highlighted concerns that had been raised related to FoRB, especially regarding imprisonment: allegations of torture, poor living conditions, deaths while in detention and unjust pretrial detentions. The Committee also reiterated alarm at the government’s repression of indigenous ethnic communities and lack of freedom of expression for civil society organisations.⁷⁶

The **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) has recommended that Vietnam be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) every year since 2002. The US Department of State

⁷³ “Profile: A Quyn,” The 88 Project, December 31, 2017, accessed June 2020.

<https://the88project.org/profile/88/a-quyn/>.

⁷⁴ Profile: A Dao,” The 88 Project, December 31, 2017, accessed June 2020. <https://the88project.org/profile/86/a-dao/>.

⁷⁵ European Parliament, Joint Motion for a Resolution on Vietnam, notably the situation of political prisoners (2018/2925 (RSP)) November 14, 2018. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-8-2018-0526_EN.html.

⁷⁶ “UN Live United Nations Web TV - Search Results for ‘Vietnam’ - Consideration of Viet Nam (Cont'd) - 3581st Meeting, 125th Session of Human Rights Committee,” United Nations, March 12, 2019. <http://webtv.un.org/search/consideration-of-viet-nam-contd-3581st-meeting-125th-session-of-human-rights-committee/6013104672001/?term=viet%20nam&lan=english&sort=date>.

designated Vietnam as a CPC in 2004 but lifted this designation in 2006 after a bilateral agreement. At the time, USCIRF cautioned that it was too soon to ensure that progress regarding religious freedom would continue. In its 2020 report, USCIRF still found cause for Vietnam to be designated as a CPC.⁷⁷

CASE STUDIES

Pastor tortured while serving 17-year sentence, now partially paralysed

Siu Bler was a pastor at the Amoi Evangelical Church who was previously arrested in 2001 after his community protested years of harassment by the authorities. When he was released in 2003, he was placed on probation for two years.

On 27 August 2004, he was arrested again for defending his Church's right to freedom of religion. He was sentenced to 17 years in prison, to be followed by three years of probation.

While in detention, he was tortured so severely that half of his body is now paralysed.

Siu Bler is a member of the Ba Na ethnic minority group of the Montagnards.⁷⁸

Evangelical pastor sentenced to 12 years in prison under unknown charges

Y Yich was an Evangelical pastor from the Gia Lai Province who was previously arrested for 'plotting against the government' and sentenced to four years in prison. After his release in 2011, he was placed on probation for three years. He resumed proselytising within his community and was subsequently arrested on 13 May 2013. He was sentenced to 12 years in prison, but the exact charges against him are unknown.

While in detention, he has been subjected to torture and his health has been deteriorating as a consequence. The prison authorities have denied him medical treatment despite him suffering from high blood pressure, rheumatism, and stomach inflammation. Additionally, his family has not been allowed to send him medicine.

⁷⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Vietnam 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Vietnam.pdf>.

⁷⁸ "Profile: Siu Bler," The 88 Project, December 31, 2017, accessed June 2020. <https://the88project.org/profile/97/siu-bler/>.

Y Yich is a member of the Ba Na ethnic minority group of the Montagnards.⁷⁹

Sentenced to eight years in prison for advocating for religious freedom

On 6 January 2012, **A Yum Balk** was arrested for speaking out against the government's suppression of religious freedom. He was sentenced to eight years in prison under Article 87. His expected release date was 6 January 2020, but there has been no confirmation that he is now free.

A Yum Balk is a member of the Ba Na ethnic minority group of the Montagnards.⁸⁰

Conclusions

It would be much too simplistic to relegate all repression of Evangelical-Pentecostal Protestants to government contention with proselytising activities such as public preaching and the distribution of Christian literature. There are other elements at play due to deeply rooted discords in the culture, history and politics of each country. For instance, the fact that many of these groups hail from the US and Europe makes it difficult to separate the message from the messenger. This is the case for countries with a Communist ideology, such as China, Eritrea and Vietnam. Geopolitics is also a factor in Iran because instead of Muslims converting to historical ethnic churches such as the Assyrian Church, they are joining Protestant groups evangelised by American churches in the last century.

It is unsurprising that some governments resist the 'foreign influence' that comes with missionary activities originating from countries that they consider corrupt or immoral. Especially when there is already a prominent ethno-religious identity, evangelising activities from abroad can be perceived as invasive or disruptive to national unity. If missionaries come from a former coloniser or from countries that promote policies in the receiving country that are deemed harmful, this too can provoke hostilities on the part of governments. This is particularly the case for Vietnam, where some ethno-religious groups supported a former colonial power (France) and a country that waged war against then North-Vietnam (the US).

For these reasons and more, several states have banned foreign missionary activities altogether. Sometimes such policies are based more on paranoia than on concrete evidence that these FoRB activities are a threat. There is a significant

⁷⁹ "Profile: Y Yich," The 88 Project, December 31, 2017, accessed June 2020. <https://the88project.org/profile/105/y-yich/>.

⁸⁰ "Profile: A Yum," The 88 Project, December 31, 2017, accessed May 2020. <https://the88project.org/profile/90/a-yum/>.

difference between distributing literature about a religious group and ‘conspiring to overthrow the regime’. Of course, governments are charged with looking after the general welfare of society and protecting their citizens from harm. Furthermore, it is true that not all religious ideologies are harmless in nature.

However, any resistance to proselytising must be viewed within the framework of international norms regarding FoRB. These norms include ‘the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance’.⁸¹ States must find ways to balance the need for societal stability with their commitment to ensure fundamental freedoms for all of their citizens.

⁸¹ The United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 18, 1948, accessed June 2020. https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf.