

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD **REPORT 2023**

## Executive Summary



Aid to the  
Church in Need

ACN CANADA

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Unless otherwise specified, all country data, religious demography, and GDP per capita (PPP adjusted, to allow for comparison between countries) come from the latest available information by: Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, eds. World Religion Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020). The GINI index figures are the latest available at [www.databank.worldbank.org](http://www.databank.worldbank.org). A GINI indicator measures inequality of income and consumption distribution, a Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality.

# Introduction

By Regina Lynch,  
Executive President, ACN International

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) is a Catholic charity established in 1947 to help serve suffering and persecuted Christians around the world who are in pastoral and material need. For over 75 years, the projects of the Pontifical Charity have sought to keep the Faith alive in areas of the world where the Catholic Church is encountering discrimination, oppression, and persecution.

Although these projects respond to requests from bishops and our other project partners, and are channelled through the Catholic Church, ACN's aid frequently benefits other religious communities too, both directly and indirectly. For example, in Lebanon where ACN supports Catholic schools, most of the students are Muslim. These Muslim families seek out Catholic education because of its high quality. This also fosters dialogue between the various religious communities.

In sub-Saharan Africa where jihadist violence rages, when rural villages are attacked by Boko Haram or ISIS, villagers – both Muslim and Christian – flee to the nearest place of refuge; often, where there are neither military nor police, these victims seek shelter in church buildings. Here too ACN is called to assist priests and Sisters offering care and spiritual solace to those who are traumatized. As the Foreword by Sister Gloria shows, in extreme crisis, where NGOs, UN workers and diplomats have no option but to leave, the Catholic Church ends up being the sole provider of material and pastoral care – as well as a lone voice pleading on behalf of victims. The Church never leaves because she is of the land.

Since 1999, Aid to the Church in Need has been publishing the Religious Freedom in the World Report – a global analysis (196 countries) assessing the status of this fundamental human right for followers of all religious traditions. Often, we are asked: 'Why produce a report on religious freedom?' ACN's Persecuted and Forgotten? Report assesses the oppression of Christians, but this can only be understood in the context of the right of every individual to be free from religious coercion.

Feedback from previous editions of the Religious Freedom in the World Report has increasingly stressed a desire not only to be informed and to pray about the situation, but to take steps to help. People engaging with the report have told us they want to know whether there is anything they can do to help survivors of persecution and prevent religious freedom violations from occurring in the future.

One key response is aid. As a Catholic charity, ACN is providing support to over 5,000 projects in 132 countries around the world. In addition to the pastoral and emergency help, this religious freedom report sets out for the first-time suggested advocacy actions for readers to take.

1. Pray: pray for the victims of discrimination and violence.
2. Share information: spread the word about this report in your networks – family, friends, in person and on social media – and highlight the report's Main Findings.
3. Speak up for victims of persecution: use this report to identify cases of individuals or groups of people who have suffered religious freedom violations, and advocate for them in your communities and networks using social media.
4. Engage with politicians: inform and encourage your political representatives (e.g., members of parliament) to defend the rights of those who suffer discrimination and persecution for their faith.
5. Keep informed: Find out about new laws and policies which could be used to persecute vulnerable faith groups.

The *ACN Religious Freedom in the World Report* seeks only to collate information and provide analysis about the abuse of this fundamental human right worldwide. It is a tool. The tool is only as good as those who take it up, share it with others, and work to effect change.



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# Foreword

by Sr. Gloria Cecilia Narváez Argoti,  
Franciscan Sisters of Mary Immaculate

On February 7, 2017, I was kidnapped in Karangasso, southern Mali, by what we later discovered was a jihadist group. After four years and eight months, I was eventually released on October 9, 2021. Undoubtedly, it was one of the most spiritually transformative experiences of my life. Today, looking back, even though it sounds paradoxical, it was perhaps one of the greatest blessings that God has given me.

I began to work in this African country in 2010. As a Sister in a mostly Muslim region, I reached out especially to women. And I want to draw particular attention to this fact (working in a Muslim-majority region) because the charism of Saint Francis of Assisi for my religious community – the Franciscan Sisters of Mary Immaculate – places special emphasis on fraternity as a gift from God.

It was precisely this fraternal nature that made the people of Mali so fond of us missionaries. The Muslims of the community in which we served admired us for two things: constant prayers and open fraternity. They always saw us united and praying, working for others, with kindness, regardless of discomforts or precarious conditions, with a permanent smile and neighbourliness. Differences in ethnicity, class or religion made no difference to us; we treated everyone with love.

Families, for their part, welcomed us into their homes and shared their food; for example, at the end of Ramadan (in Islam, this is a month of fasting which ends with a great feast), we were invited to celebrate in their homes, and we were always treated with great kindness. There were no closed doors or walls. At the same time, this provided an opportunity to evangelize in our own way, for we told them that our work and fraternal relationship with different people were not the work of this or that Sister, but that everything was done thanks to God, who is the giver of all blessings.

But to my kidnapers, all that didn't matter. In such a situation, the fraternity that until then had been a constant in my missionary work, vanished. Freedom, not only physical liberty, which allowed me to move without restrictions, became only a word, an immense longing. As time went by, and perhaps because of what I had previously experienced in continuous, loving, respectful and kind contact with people of every religious denomination and all conditions, I realized that I had not only lost my own freedom, but also my religious liberty: I was singled out, beaten, and insulted for professing my Catholic faith, or at least for trying to.

Yet, despite such adverse circumstances, the bad weather, the daily abuse, humiliations, deprivation of food and water, I never – not once – failed to thank God for allowing me to wake up and be alive amid all the difficulties and dangers: 'How could I not praise you, bless you and thank you, my God? For you have filled me with peace in the face of insults and mistreatment!'

I also prayed – and continue to pray – for my captors. Even when I was beaten for no reason, or simply because I was saying my prayers, I said to myself: 'My God, it is hard to be chained and to be beaten, but I live this moment as you present it to me... And, despite everything, I would not want any of these men (my captors) to be harmed.'

In my work as a missionary, I have done my utmost to be respectful towards others, and this has been essential to perform my work. If we love, we accept, and are respectful. If we respect the freedom of others to live according to their religion, then we can receive the same respect.

Now that I have been given the opportunity to write the Foreword of the 2023 edition of the Religious Freedom in the World Report, I am aware of the importance of speaking about this fundamental right – religious liberty – to ensure that it is protected, especially within a polarized society where attempts are made to sweep under the carpet the abuses committed against the freedom to profess religious beliefs.

From my mission work in a Muslim environment and sharing a good part of my captivity with two women, one Muslim and the other Protestant, I learned that if we love, accept and respect one another, we can live as brothers and sisters and that acceptance does not mean giving up one's beliefs, for true respect is about listening, welcoming, and acknowledging everyone for who they are.

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Sister Gloria Cecilia Narváez Argoti, a missionary of the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary Immaculate, who was abducted in Mali in February 2017 and released after nearly five years of captivity.

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# Main findings

In the context of a tense global climate impacted by **the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fallout of the war in Ukraine, the military and economic concerns around the South China Sea, and the rapid, worldwide increase in the cost of living**, religious freedom was violated in countries where more than 4.9 billion people live. We count 61 countries where the citizens faced severe violations of religious freedom.

**The Red category**, which denotes the existence of persecution, includes 28 countries which are home to 4.03 billion people who altogether make up more than half (51.6 percent) of the world's population. Of these 28 countries, 13 are in Africa where in many regions the situation deteriorated sharply.

**The Orange category**, which denotes the existence of discrimination, includes 33 countries, home to almost 853 million people. The situation worsened in 13 of these countries.

**The “under observation” classification** includes countries where newly emerging factors of concern have been observed which have the potential to cause a fundamental breakdown in freedom of religion. The Regional Analysis maps (pages 18, 23, 28, 32, 38, 43) identify these countries with the symbol of a magnifying glass.

In all classifications, **hate crimes and atrocity crimes** may occur. These incidents are the manifestation of the violation of religious freedom.

**The remainder of the countries were not classified**, but that does not necessarily mean all was perfect in matters relating to religious freedom.

**During the period under review, intense persecution became more acute and concentrated, and impunity grew.** This persecution included **extreme violations of Article 18** of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

**1. Globally, the retention and consolidation of power in the hands of autocrats and fundamentalist group leaders** led to increased violations of all human rights, including religious freedom. **A combination** of terrorist attacks, destruction of religious heritage and symbols (Turkey, Syria), electoral system manipulation (Nigeria, Iraq), mass surveillance (China), proliferation of anti-conversion laws and financial restrictions (Southeast Asia and Middle East) increased the oppression of all religious communities.

**2. “Hybrid” cases of “polite” and bloody persecution became more frequent.** Occurring mostly without protest,

governments applied controversial laws restricting freedom of religion or discriminated against certain religious communities (*cfr anti-conversion laws*). At the same time, violent attacks against those of the “wrong” religion were “normalized” and mostly not prosecuted (Latin America). This was also observed in Western nations but there was better recourse to justice.

**3. An increase in the number of majoritarian religious communities suffering persecution.** To date, most faith groups suffering persecution were from minority religious communities. Increasingly majoritarian religious communities were also experiencing persecution (Nigeria, Nicaragua).

**4. An increasingly muted response from the international community towards atrocities by “strategically important” autocratic regimes (China, India), demonstrated a growing culture of impunity.** Key countries (Nigeria, Pakistan) escaped international sanctions and other punishments following revelations of religious freedom violations against their own citizens.

**5. The rise of “opportunistic caliphates”** During the review period, transnational jihadist networks in Africa increasingly changed tactics. By degrees, they shifted from conquering and defending fixed territories towards hit-and-run attacks aimed at creating isolated communities (*cfr Mozambique*) in poorly defended rural areas (preferably ones) with mineral resources (*cfr D.R. Congo*). Traditional kill and loot strategies gave way to a tendency to impose illegal tax and trade, resulting in a state within a state. The insecurity and lack of government control led to revolts and military coups (two in Mali and one in Burkina Faso).

**6. Divergent trends within Muslim communities** became more visible. On the one hand, disenfranchised, impoverished, and frustrated youth were increasingly attracted by Islamist extremist terrorist and criminal networks (Africa). On the other hand, recent surveys, notably in Iran, showed growing numbers of Muslims were self-identifying as non-religious.



**7. Increased persecution of Muslims, including by other Muslims.** Brutal persecution continued in China against the Uyghurs, with Muslims in India and Myanmar also suffering discrimination and persecution. Increasing incidents of **intra-Muslim persecution** were also reported between Sunni and Shi'a (Hazara in Afghanistan), between national and "foreign" Muslim interpretations as well as between dominant and so-called deviant forms of Islam (Ahmadi in Pakistan).

**8. Reported aggression against the Jewish community in the West increased after the COVID-19 lockdowns.** Anti-Semitic hate crimes reported in OSCE countries increased from 582 in 2019 to 1,367 in 2021.

**9. Abductions, sexual violence, including sexual enslavement and forced religious conversion continued unabated and remained largely unpunished** (West Africa, Pakistan). Abductions and human trafficking were fuelled by worsening poverty and increased armed conflicts. In dozens of countries religious minority women and girls suffered especially from this form of violence.

**10. Inflating numbers of faithful as a means of maintaining political power.** In some cases, faith communities, seeking to preserve their political, religious, and social status, exaggerated numbers of faithful by giving misleading religious data when officially registering children, or by postponing population census indefinitely (Lebanon, India, Malaysia).

**11. Increased scrutiny, including mass surveillance, impacted faith groups. In the West, social media was used to marginalize and target religious groups.** These developments undermined fundamental liberties, including freedom of conscience, thought, religion, freedom of expression, movement, and assembly.

**12. In the West, "cancel culture," including "compelled speech,"** evolved from (verbal) harassment of individuals, who for religious reasons take different views, to include legal threats and loss of job opportunities. Individuals who, because of their faith, failed to articulate positions specifically endorsing views in line with prevailing ideological demands ("cancel culture") were threatened with legal sanctions. Social media was an important factor driving this trend.

**13. Derogatory content about minority faiths was inserted into school textbooks (India, Pakistan) with potentially significant consequences for the future of interfaith relations.**

**14. Proliferation of anti-conversion legislation, as well as reconversion initiatives offering economic benefits to those who join the majority religion or return to it** (Asia, North Africa). Evidence revealed new legislation and harsher implementation of existing anti-conversion laws where the religious majority sought to entrench political power. Renewed reconversion efforts offered economic privileges to members who revert. Conversely, these benefits were withdrawn from converts compromising the welfare of the entire family in poverty-stricken areas.

**15. Increased attacks on religious leaders and other Church personnel by organized criminal groups** (Latin America). Religious representatives, champions of migrants and other disadvantaged communities, were targeted – abducted and even murdered – for speaking out against criminal gangs and taking action to stop them.

**16. Record participation in popular religious celebrations after COVID-19 lockdowns.** After three years of suspension and restrictions in most regions of the world, the return of major religious feasts – public expressions of popular religiosity – attracted millions of faithful. (*cf. Case Study on religious celebrations*).

**17. Interreligious dialogue initiatives have increased.** Pope Francis and other Church leaders across the world expanded their outreach to other religious communities. Indonesia's religious leaders, Nahdlatul Ulama, increased dialogue with their Hindu counterparts, and at the G20 set up a permanent group on religion, involving other major faith communities.



# Article 18: An indivisible right divided

By Dr. José Luis Bazán

During the drafting process of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in May 1948, the representative of the USSR recommended a provision emphasizing independence between freedom of thought and religious freedom, giving prominence to the first to, allegedly, “guarantee the freedom of conscience,” “to promote the development of modern sciences ... [and] to discard all old-fashioned beliefs and religious fanaticism.”<sup>1</sup> The Soviet delegation justified the proposal by stating that “the expression ‘freedom of thought’ included scientific and philosophic thought as well as thought in its religious forms,”<sup>2</sup> a position similar to that of the Chinese representative who expressed the view that “freedom of thought included freedom of conscience as well as religious freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the United States confirmed the proposal that made “freedom of religion” (and not only “religious observance”) a part of the UDHR Article 18,<sup>4</sup> a final agreement was reached only following a principle expressed by the Philippines that a declaration on human rights “should attempt [...] to express a common philosophy for all nations and thus further the advancement of the human race”<sup>5</sup> by way of recognizing a single right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The USSR reluctantly accepted the final version of the draft text because “other countries were not as progressive as his own and therefore, it would have been too much to expect them to subscribe to the same guarantees as the USSR.”<sup>6</sup>

The 1948 USSR concept to divide the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion into three autonomous, albeit connected, rights is back. Of note are efforts to carve out and rank the components of Article 18, to single out freedom of thought and conscience as belonging to the realm of non-religious individuals while freedom of religion would be, in that perspective, only for religious believers.

This deconstruction of the single right into three was evidenced in an October 5, 2021, report titled *The Freedom of Thought* by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, when he stated that: “freedom of thought is recognized as one

of three distinct, but equal rights within the right to freedom of ‘thought, conscience and religion or belief.’”<sup>7</sup> The approach divided the rights into three – instead of one indivisible right with three dimensions as originally conceived – with a singular focus on freedom of thought.

This line of reasoning is also evident in documents by humanist associations. For example, the Humanist International in its annual *The Freedom of Thought Report* highlighting “violations of freedom of conscience and of belief [...] against the non-religious in everyday life,”<sup>8</sup> the word “religion” doesn’t appear, considering only “thought” and “conscience.”

Finally, this right is also reshaped in the #Faith4Rights toolkit promoted by the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights. For example, in Module I (Context) addressing freedom of conscience, the authors state: “Freedom of conscience is imperative and larger than the freedom of religion or belief.”<sup>9</sup>

These efforts not only negate the internal harmony of this triadic right – and of the human rights system which is based on equal dignity for all – but contradicts the spirit of Article 18, which opens space for the transcendent conscience of each person to think, feel, decide, and live in accordance with the most essential questions about our human life and final destiny.

Following the thesis of Karl Marx that mankind should be freed “from the witchery of religion,”<sup>10</sup> the attempt to subordinate religious freedom to freedom of thought and conscience would demote freedom of religion to a “second-class” freedom, associated with irrationality, superstition, and sectarianism – a permanent source of problems. Accordingly, this would elevate the other rights to “first-class” freedoms, as expressions of rationality and universality and a solution to social tensions. Ultimately freedom of religion would become freedom from religion.



Religious freedom, however, has a historic place in human history as it was “of decisive importance for the development and practical breakthrough of the human rights idea in European and North American constitutional history”<sup>11</sup> and is considered “the canary in the coal mine,” the most trustful tool to anticipate general human rights violations by a repressive regime or tyrant.

Religious freedom – which is not reducible to worship as “it radiates upon the entire spiritual and practical human life”<sup>12</sup> – cannot exist without freedom of thought and conscience as these freedoms imply per se a position about religion, be it adherence to, rejection of, or indifference towards.



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The sculpture “Freedom of Religion” presents a man holding aloft a sphere embossed with the symbols of the main religions of the world, symbolically maintaining and supporting the sacredness of our beliefs - as interprets its author, Marlene Hilton Moore. The McMurtry Gardens of Justice in Toronto, Canada, 2012.

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# Global analysis

By Dr. Marcela Szymanski

The period under review (May 2021 - December 2022) was dominated by COVID-19, an unprecedented world health emergency which prompted equally unparalleled international crisis response programs – notably lockdowns and other thoroughgoing restrictions and vaccine roll-out. In 2022 the world’s attention was also gripped by the war in Ukraine and its political repercussions. Also of great significance were an economic crisis, notably rapid inflation, and fears of international armed conflict in the South China Sea. All this and more diverted attention away from issues relating to religious freedom at a time of increased violations of this vital human right around the world. This analysis will set out to show that the COVID-19 period was especially catastrophic for a number of religious minorities who were targeted with impunity while international attention was elsewhere. Unlike in previous editions of the report, where this section focused on geographic categorization, for the most part the analysis below will instead address prevailing themes and trends. The methodology of the Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) *Religious Freedom in the World Report*, measures violations of Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) according to a sliding scale of severity. Starting with manifestations of intolerance, these then pass the threshold of “discrimination,” whereby the law applies differently to religious individuals and communities facing these problems. More serious forms of intolerance are deemed to be “persecution” in situations where state and nonstate actors openly oppress and persecute with impunity.

The research for this 2023 report reveals that there are 61 countries where discrimination and persecution are clearly apparent, where the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is under pressure or curtailed through new laws. As a result, citizens are persecuted by their own government or are murdered, often with little or no response from the international community (**See Map**).

In this edition, the report identifies trends indicating the increasing threat to religious minorities posed by autocrats. **Autocrats are defined** here as rulers who exert their power, their use of force and of economic resources with little to no limits. As per L. Reardon (2019), “Whether the autocracy is composed of an absolute monarch or a supreme authoritarian, religious, military, fascist, or communist leader, the autocrat strengthens legitimacy by controlling competing power centres within the state.”<sup>13</sup> A religious community is often one such power centres, because of its “ability to mobilize the citizenry,”<sup>14</sup> which the autocrat seeks to control.

Some **new autocrats have emerged** during the reporting

period and existing ones have consolidated their position. In both cases, they have cracked down on religious leaders and faith groups, fearful of their influence and status in the community, in other cases they try to co-opt them. Autocrats have struggled to balance their often violent and oppressive efforts to eliminate all opposition, including from religious groups, against the need to present a humane and acceptable façade to the global community. Pandemic-related economic challenges, exacerbated by energy shortages caused by the war in Ukraine, and competing international trade interests resulted in a cynical pragmatism – a **selective blindness and deafness among western leaders**. Such governments, which previously prided themselves on a ‘rules-based world order,’ no longer upheld internationally recognized standards of human rights.

Included in this report’s **Red category (persecution)**, are 28 countries with a total of 4.02 billion people equalling 51.6 percent of the world’s population. Of particular note are the two most populous countries, China and India, which are among the worst religious freedom violators. The autocrats at different levels of government combine harsh repression with soft persecution. Examples include controlling access to jobs, education and health services, installing mass surveillance, imposing financial and electoral obstacles, and failing to impose law and order when faith communities come under attack from local mobs or terrorists. Those wielding power, both state and non-state (terrorist) actors, implement a strategy with the same ultimate objective: eliminating the competing authority held by the undesirable religious community. Here we observe a new trend regarding the type of perpetrator (see below under “Perpetrators”), with **more states persecuting their own citizens**. Finally, several countries in the category of persecution – particularly those governments adhering to and espousing a majoritarian religion – not only manipulate the religiosity of their citizens but also inflate their numbers to entrench and extend their political dominance.

**In the Orange category (discrimination)**, the report finds that there has been considerable change during the review period. Included within the 33 countries in this category are three newcomers – Haiti, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. Deteriorating religious freedom conditions meant Nicaragua and Sudan – two countries marked orange in the 2021 report – have moved into the Red category. New laws are being enforced, effectively legalizing the violation of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion of specific groups. In 2021, there were signs of hope among countries in the Middle East and Asia where an understanding of religious freedom rights seemed to be developing, but those hopes have been dashed as existing laws and penal-

ties became harsher (e.g.: “anti-conversion laws”). Meantime, there was little improvement in the education systems to reduce the discrimination of minority faith groups (**See Backgrounder on Schoolbooks**).

Classification in the Orange category is also indicative of authoritarian rulers not only applying laws to curtail religious freedom, but also failing to provide **any protection or justice for the victims of physical attacks**.

Finally, there is the “**Under observation**” category. The 2021 report highlighted the need to remain vigilant, as human rights often disappear gradually, in small steps, without anyone noticing until it is too late. Tenets of religious freedom vulnerable to incremental erosion include: “freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”<sup>15</sup> Each of these aspects of religious freedom is fundamental and indispensable. The weakening of any one of them can be seen as a threat to the right to religious freedom as a whole. Evidence revealing the decline in the enjoyment of this fundamental right, as states abdicated their responsibility to protect all citizens, resulted in the country in question being placed “Under observation.” This is a category where the country reports indicate not only an incremental move towards the worst violations, but moreover reveals incidents falling into the various classifications of intolerance, discrimination and sometimes even persecution. Examples include isolated attacks, even murders, with clear religious bias, and the destruction or vandalization of places of worship. Two countries – Haiti and Israel – placed “Under observation” in 2021 descended into the Orange category. Meantime, eight countries were added to this category: Argentina, Guinea Bissau, Benin, Burundi, Eswatini, Ghana, Indonesia, and Madagascar.

### **Resolute and confident autocrats**

The autocrats driving the worst violations to freedom of religion are likely to belong to one or several **categories of perpetrators**: authoritarian governments, Islamist extremist extremists, or ethno-religious nationalists. Another type of perpetrator with an interest in eliminating religious leaders who challenge their authority are **organized criminal groups**. In several parts of the world, these are the *de facto* rulers having access to more money and better weaponry than the state. They thus give the impression that the government has abdicated its responsibility to protect all citizens, or else that the authorities are in fact cooperating with the criminals. They mainly proliferate in failed and semi-failed states such as Somalia, Libya, Afghanistan, Haiti, and Syria.

The advantage that **state autocrats** (except absolute dictatorships) have over organized criminal groups is that, in most cases, they can conceal their human rights violations under

a democratic cloak pointing to elections of whatever form, which brought them to power. The conundrum, however, for autocrats who manipulate the majoritarian religious group (**See country reports on Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar (Burma)**) is the need to please both this voter base and yet maintain a ‘democratic’ façade towards international partners (**See Case Study Nicaragua**).

Another apparently democratic way to asphyxiate a minority religious community is to pass **laws suppressing their sources of funding**. For example, India’s “Foreign currency regulation act” – the complicated set of rules limiting access to foreign funding for all local groups (faith-based and non) dependent on foreign aid – has led to a suspension of social services by faith-based organizations to the poorest populations.

Our 2021 edition referenced “**polite persecution**,” the term introduced by Pope Francis to describe laws, predominantly in the West, that, under the guise of culture and progress, curtail the fundamental rights of individuals – particularly the right of conscientious objection. In many countries, this concept, has become prophetic where intolerance has morphed into discrimination – when **laws have been introduced making it “legal” to strip away citizens’ fundamental rights**. Healthcare workers are deprived of the right to freedom of conscience when they are obliged, under the threat of losing their jobs, to participate in procedures such as euthanasia or late-term abortion, or when someone can be arrested for standing in silence and praying within an abortion clinic’s buffer zone (**See OSCE Regional Analysis**).

Developing from a recent cultural phenomenon – a rising wave of new **anthropological** norms and concepts – a new challenge to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is ‘compelled speech.’ Authorities, including the courts, have begun to introduce new definitions to personal identity, where all citizens are not only expected to publicly accept norms they might consider contrary to their conscience, but are compelled to use the new definitions, risking the penalty of hate speech if not observed. The framed discourse itself becomes a means to deny conscientious objection (**See Regional Analysis Latin America, and Backgrounder “Compelled Speech”**).

The case of the former Minister of the Interior in Finland, Päivi Räsänen, highlighted in this publication (**See Case Study, Finland**), reveals another challenge to the vague definition of hate speech, censorship. In April 2020, charges were brought against Ms Räsänen retroactively by the State for sharing a 2004 publication about marriage, which quoted the Bible. Conscientious objection, and freedom of thought, including on religious grounds, has been infringed or denied.

### **Fabricating minorities**

‘Attacks on minorities’ is a phrase oft repeated but questions



remain about what precisely this phrase means. In some cultures, minority status brings certain privileges and is therefore positive, but for others this designation is misleading, appearing to ignore the numerical strength of the faith communities in question, as well as their historical and wider cultural influence in society, and indeed their prominent role in schools and other welfare support. Of greater concern, however, is evidence revealing that a **numerical, economic, or political minority can be “fabricated,”** pushing communities into irrelevance through the application of both violent and non-violent measures, either for political and/or economic gain of the majoritarian group.

Numbers are important. On April 25, 2023, the British newspaper the *Financial Times* highlighted the importance of **religious group demographics** in India and Nigeria, asserting their value as regards to obtaining power and retaining it. The article stated that “population figures largely determine political representation and what share of the national purse is distributed to each region.” The newspaper noted that many governments postpone population surveys for decades, for fear of finding unfavourable changes among the groups supporting their hold on power. The report went on to describe, “local political, religious and ethnic leaders accused of inflating the numbers.”<sup>16</sup>

The means by which religious demographics can be manipulated are numerous, including apparently positive consequences if a particular religion is adopted or kept. For example, in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, country reports reveal that by **providing material benefits exclusively to a religious**

**community,** authorities seek to maintain the numerical size of that community for political gain. At the most basic level, in Malaysia, it is customary to register all newborns as belonging to the majority religion, and it is up to the parents to contest it later. In Pakistan, access to the military and the government, to national sports teams, to better paid jobs are, by imposition of new laws, open exclusively to the majoritarian religious group. In India and Lebanon, several “personal status laws” and “caste scheduling” regulations consist of economic benefits that are offered to those belonging to the majority religion and no other **(See Case Study Laws Controlling Religious Demographics).**

Examples of negative pressure include the proliferation of laws making it a crime to change religion. The expansion of so-called **anti-conversion laws** across Asia, which carry fines and prison penalties to both the convert and the spiritual guide, is designed to prevent minority faith groups inviting interested members of the majoritarian faith group to convert. In the Middle East, punishment for apostasy can go as far as the death penalty. Conversely, “reconversion” from the minority faith community is encouraged with material benefits to those who repent and return to the majority faith. **(See Regional Analysis Asia and Middle East.)**

In addition, several countries impose to religious minorities **obstacles to participate in the political life** of the nation. These include steps from reducing their capacity to vote, right through to outright bans<sup>17</sup> on members of religious minorities taking up government positions. **(See Case Study Lebanon the Christian Exodus, and country reports for Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.)**





Finally, the most criminal form of demographic manipulation occurs where a religious group is forced into a minority status following **constant discrimination or violent atrocities**. For example, in Iraq and Syria, the Christian population has suffered targeted and repeated violence spurring emigration and thus forcibly reducing a minority religious community to the point where its long-term survival is called into question.

In terms of migration prompted by extremist violence, a repatriation is underway in parts of Africa. Country reports indicate that jihadist affiliates of al-Qaeda and Islamic State are attacking relatively undefended rural areas for territorial gain but also, as in DR Congo and Mozambique, concentrating on areas with mineral wealth. Although Islamist terrorist violence is mainly indiscriminate attacking Muslims and Christians alike, since our last report jihadists have **increasingly targeted Christians** (See *Case Study Stoned to death for a Whatsapp*). Assaults take place during Christian worship, and the murders can be particularly gruesome. As noted by clergy in Benue State, Nigeria, on occasion victims are first shot and then their faces are hacked by machetes or other weapons “so that God may not recognize them.”<sup>18</sup> Terrorists will also target priests or Sisters, abducting or killing them, and will burn down chapels and schools. One single such attack can drive out the entire population of a village, leaving them homeless and destitute. They lose their sources of income as they abandon their fields and shops, and their children are denied education and healthcare. The result is that a region is emptied of its historic religious presence, and a new economic and political minority in need of every basic support, emerges (See *backgrounder Nigeria a failing democracy*).

Another form of religious violence is occurring in Latin America and other developing regions, the **identification of traditional religions as enemies** of pro-abortion and other policies affecting women. Increasingly violent demonstrations in Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, as well in several countries in the West, for example those organized to mark the UN’s “Women’s Day” (March 8), saw religious buildings and faithful attacked. People were left unaided by police and other emergency services as they sought to defend their churches, temples, and other religious buildings at great personal risk. Equally, following the violence, there were little or no legal consequences for the perpetrators, which gave them a certain sense of impunity (See *Regional Analysis Latin America, OSCE*). Notwithstanding these and other difficulties outlined in the Latin America report, the region is also a beacon of hope, as can be seen in the renewed public expressions of faith where millions united in joyful celebration across the continent following the lifting of COVID-19 health restrictions (See *Backgrounder Religious Celebrations*).

Paradoxically, vocal support in defence of women’s rights falls silent in the face of **abduction, forced conversion and sexual enslavement of religious minority women and girls**. Euphemistically referred to as “forced marriage,” these crimes – the abduction, rape, and forced conversion of principally minority Hindu and Christian girls, who are often underage – are at least in part motivated by a desire to limit the growth of the faith communities in question by reducing the number of babies born in that religious community. Ultimately, if carried out at scale over a long period, such criminal activity could contribute towards the group’s disappearance. As such, it can

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Religious leaders gathered at the VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, 2022.



be classified as an “act of genocide” as defined in the UN Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide<sup>19</sup> (**See country reports Pakistan, Regional Analysis Africa**).

No Western nation can truthfully claim they do not know about the abuses occurring in the Arabian Peninsula, China, Pakistan and Nigeria. With the West looking the other way, often motivated by the need to guarantee the provision of natural and energy resources, the perpetrators become more assertive and make local legislation more restrictive. In this way, **impunity is tacitly granted** to perpetrators by the “international community.” Pakistan can again be cited as a case study where the newly expanded blasphemy law additionally covers insults to the family of the Prophet, or the Islamo-centric National Single Curriculum obligatory for all schools, contributing to discriminatory attitudes towards religious minorities (**See Regional Analysis Middle East, Asia, Africa**). Despite this, there are some positive developments in the West such as the new appetite to **apply targeted, personal sanctions to individual violators** rather than to entire countries, referred in some countries as “Magnitsky-type” sanctions.

An important beacon of hope is that, as more people in the world identify as religious<sup>20</sup>, the impetus to develop **interfaith dialogue** is growing. Not only has Pope Francis continued his rapprochement with the different branches of Islam, but also the largest Muslim organization, the Indonesian Nadhlatul Ulama, started a structured dialogue with Hindu religious leaders during the 2022 G20 meetings with a follow-up scheduled for 2023 in India (**See Backgrounder: Towards a more comprehensive Catholic-Muslim dialogue**).





## CASE STUDY

# Nigeria: Stoned to death for a WhatsApp



@ACN

On May 12, 2022, a 22-year-old Christian, Deborah Samuel Yakubu, was attacked by her classmates, stoned to death, and her body set on fire. A second-year economics student at the Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto, northern Nigeria, Deborah was accused of having sent a blasphemous message complaining via WhatsApp to her class about the forced introduction of religion into an academic study group. It was upon her return to school following the holidays that classmates led a group to capture her. Witnesses described that “school security and police attempted to rescue the victim but were overwhelmed by the students.”<sup>21</sup>

Contrary to Islamic legal norms, the brutal act of mob violence was a summary execution. A statement released by Sa’idu Mohamadu Maccido, the Sokoto State Sultanate Council Secretary, denounced the attack stating: “The Sultanate Council condemns the incident in its totality and has urged the security agencies to bring the perpetrators of the unjustifiable incident to justice.” [...] “The Sultanate Council has urged all to remain calm and ensure peaceful coexistence among all people of the state and nation.”<sup>22</sup>

After the attack, two individuals were arrested for the murder whereupon groups of young rioters – encouraged by adults in the background – attacked two Catholic churches; the vandals destroyed windows at the Holy Family Catholic Cathedral and partially burned the St. Kevin’s Catholic Church.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding the Sultanate’s condemnation, the series of attacks reaffirmed the fears among Christians of increasing Muslim radicalization in the north. Matthew Hassan Kukah, Catholic Bishop of the Sokoto diocese, expressed his sympathy for these fears stating: “Far from universal condemnation of this horrific act, many Islamist extremist extremists and their Imams applauded the murder, claiming it was justified, and calling for additional violence against any who might ask for legal justice against the perpetrators.”<sup>24</sup> Deborah’s family has since moved to the Christian south of Nigeria.

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Deborah Samuel Yakubu, a second-year Christian college student, who was killed by a mob of Muslim students in Sokoto, Nigeria, on May 12, 2022.

# Nigeria: A Failing Democracy?

By Maria Lozano

Nigeria is one of the largest democracies in the world. With over 200 million inhabitants, it is the continent's biggest country in demographic as well as economic terms and plays a key role in the geopolitics of sub-Saharan Africa. The African giant has been a multiparty democracy since 1999, but the past decades have seen its security problems grow bigger and more complex.<sup>25</sup> In 2022, Nigeria ranked sixth in the Global Terrorism Index<sup>26</sup> behind Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Burkina Faso, and Syria, and placed 143<sup>rd</sup> out of a total of 163 countries in the Global Peace Index.<sup>27</sup>

Almost every single problem that affects other African countries can also be found in Nigeria. The unification under British rule of territories with their own distinct ethnic, political, and religious realities created a dichotomy between the north and the south, divided by a Middle Belt that has borne the brunt of many of the current violent conflicts.

Christianity is the majoritarian religion (46.2 percent) based principally in the south whereas Islam (45.8 percent) is found mainly in the north, though this does not mean that there are no Christians in the north and vice-versa. The north-eastern State of Borno, for example, the birthplace of Boko Haram, is 30 percent Christian. Although the number of Christians and Muslims is almost identical in the country, many websites insist that Islam is the majority religion. Reinforcing this false impression is Nigeria's participation (since 1986) in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, an alliance formed by 57 countries in which Muslims are the majority.<sup>28</sup>

Politically and administratively the Muslim north is more important, but it is home to only 40 percent of the population. In principle, in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic nation, this would give the Christian south equal or greater weight, however, almost 95 percent of the political and military power at the federal level is held by Muslims. The resulting tensions hindering the country's democratic development are further exacerbated by the implementation of Shari'a Law in 12 of Nigeria's 36 northern states. With the recently elected Muslim-Muslim ticket under President-elect Tinburu, there is scepticism that anything will change under the new national government.

Although Christians with a population of almost 100 million

– almost 50 percent of the population – are not a minority, those in the northern states complain of systemic and deeply entrenched religious discrimination. Their situation is reminiscent of minority Christian populations in Pakistan, Sudan, Iraq, and Arab countries. The most significant concerns for Christians regarding the lack of religious freedom – and democratic principles – in northern Nigeria (particularly where Shari'a is applied) include: that the Constitution recognizes the (Shari'a) Penal Code in the north whereas the Criminal Code is applied in the south; that Christian girls and women suffer abduction, rape and forced marriages with little to no legal recourse; that while Muslim men may marry Christian women, Christian men may not marry Muslim women; that traditional Muslim moral standards – Hisbah – are often imposed by force, including on non-Muslims (i.e.: segregation by sex on public transport and enforcing dress codes in educational institutions); that Christians suffer political exclusion as well as a lack of equity in recruitment for the armed forces (police, military etc.); that Christian Churches are neither allowed to buy land nor given space to build chapels or places of worship in tertiary institutions; that while Christian religious education is not allowed in public schools, Islamic teachers are employed in all public schools; that Christians have fewer job opportunities, a lack of promotion opportunities in public positions, and a lack of access to social welfare; and that many Christian students opt to change their names to gain admission to professional courses.<sup>29</sup>

Religious communities, predominantly Christians, in the north and Middle Belt face the consequences of often indescribable violence – atrocities committed by armed groups (Boko Haram, ISWAP [Islamic State's West Africa Province] and Fulani militias) driven by a mix of toxic motivations including territorial gain, criminality, ethnicity and Islamist extremist jihadism bordering, in certain states, on violence with genocidal elements.

The final blow, however, is the silence and passivity of the political powers, which neither condemn nor persecute the systematic attacks, particularly by the Fulani militias, that have led to the massive internal displacement of Christians leaving entire regions depopulated. A recent report from the Makurdi diocese in Benue State denounced the fact that in one diocese in one year (2022) alone, Fulani herders attacked 93 villages



and killed 325 farmers.<sup>30</sup> At present, of the almost six million inhabitants, two million are internally displaced, most of them Christian farmers.

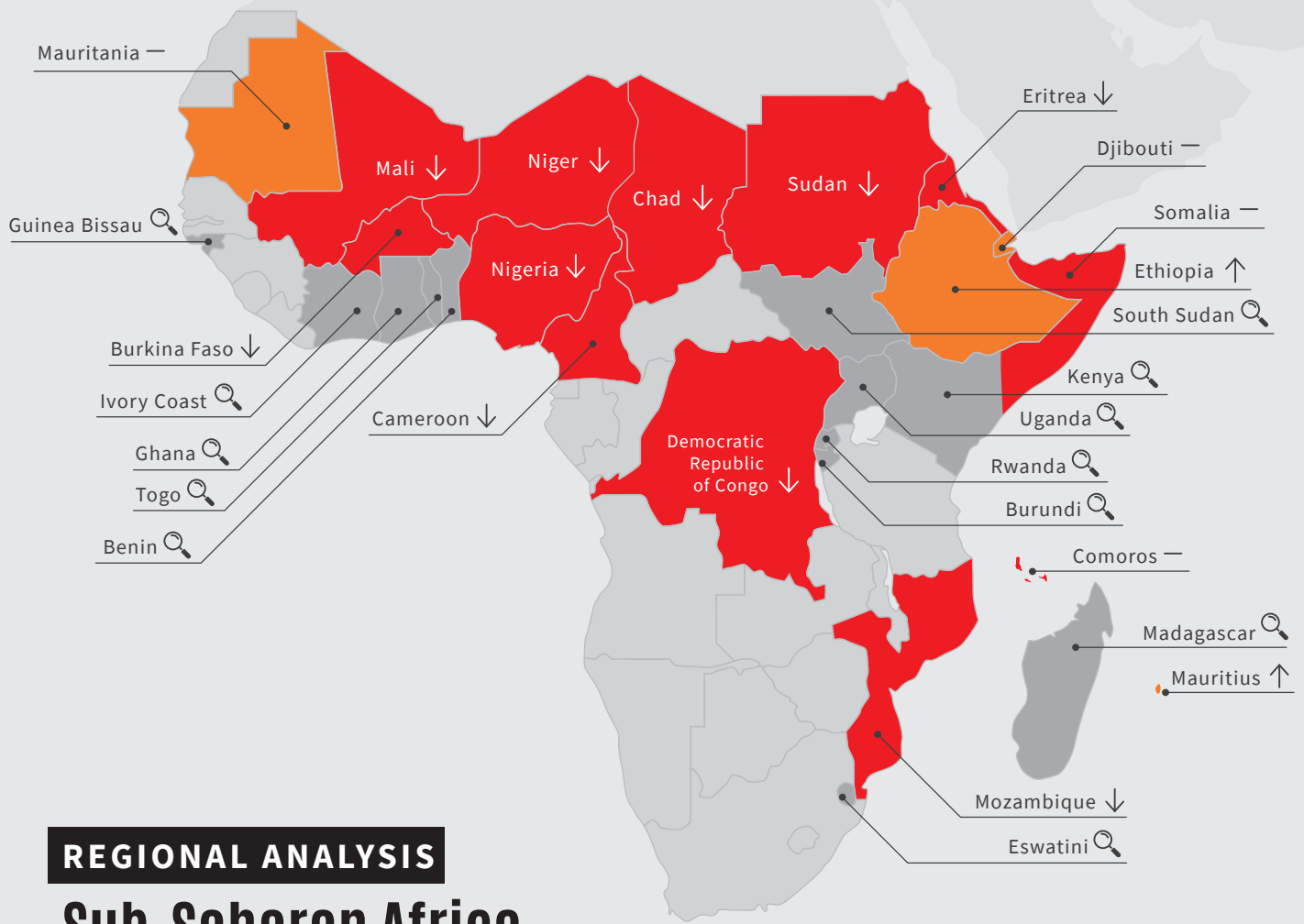
Nigeria is not alone suffering the jihadist violence with Niger, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso badly shaken by Islamic extremism. Nigeria, however, is unique and

of crucial importance for the development of the African continent. As indicated, Nigeria is an economic and demographic powerhouse with the population expected to double to 400 million in two decades. The events, and governance, in the coming years will not only have an enormous influence in the country but throughout the region. If the Nigerian authorities do not address the conflicts concerning land, ethnicity, criminality, and religious extremism, as well as the breakdown in democratic values and the equal rights of its citizens including religious freedom, the cancer of Islamist extremist jihadism and political disintegration evident in the northern half of Africa will spread. The socio-political pressure and unabated atrocities will provoke an exodus of young Christians seeing neither hope nor future in the land of the forefathers.

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A protester holding the Nigerian flag walks the streets during demonstrations in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, in October 2020.





## REGIONAL ANALYSIS

# Sub-Saharan Africa

By Mark von Riedemann

Continental events in Africa during the reporting period have been overshadowed by an explosion of violence inflicted on military and civilian populations in sub-Saharan Africa by local and transnational jihadist groups, which systematically persecute all those who do not accept the extreme Islamic ideology.

And the numbers are alarming. According to a 2023 study by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, violence perpetrated by militant Islamist extremists in the Sahel and Somalia “accounted for 77 percent of the total reported violent events across Africa in 2022.”<sup>31</sup> Of these, civilian deaths rose from “4,307 in 2021 to 7,220 in 2022” a 68 percent increase, a significant marker as “militant groups are not focused on winning hearts and minds so much as intimidating local populations into compliance.”<sup>32</sup>

### **An opportunistic caliphate**

The violence is driven, in many cases, by a toxic marriage of Islamic extremist jihadists, organized criminality, and home-grown bandits: profit-driven mercenaries or local fighters pursuing local interests incited by extremist preachers and armed by transnational terrorist groups. These groups target state authorities, the military, police, and civilians including Muslim,

Christian and traditional religious leaders and faithful.

The flourishing of radicalization and violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa can be attributed to a number of social factors including: poverty, corruption, governance weakness, illiteracy, youth unemployment, a lack of access to resources, separatist movements, and pre-existing intercommunal violence between herders and farmers over land rights (exacerbated by climate change impact)<sup>33</sup>, which all combine to fuel resentment and sustain armed violence. Jihadist movements fill the gap through ideology, economic opportunity (weapons and money) and a promised end to corruption.<sup>34</sup>

Transnational jihadist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda do not create new divisions but exploit and deepen existing ones. The strategy is less the conquering and defence of a fixed territory, an Islamic “state” as attempted in Iraq and Syria, but rather a mobile, opportunistic caliphate favouring attacks on (preferably) mineral-rich rural areas where thinly stretched military forces are less able to defend. Attacks against cities are intended to terrorize but also to pin down military forces in urban areas.

## The proliferation of Islamic terrorist extremism

Islamist extremist violence is found across Africa, but the main theatres of jihadist activity are concentrated in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, Somalia, and Mozambique.

The main Islamic terrorist groups operating in these regions include the transnational al-Qaeda and affiliates (i.e., al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)); the transnational Islamic State and affiliates (Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISS); Jama'at Nusrat al Islam (JNIM), a coalition of individual Islamist extremist groups and their affiliates; al-Shabaab (Somalia) and affiliates; and Ahlu Sunnah wa Jama'a (ASWJ), aka al-Shabaab aka IS-Moz and their affiliates; Boko Haram and affiliates; and finally unaffiliated militant groups.<sup>35</sup>

**Western Sahel**, the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, experienced "the most rapid expansion of militant Islamist extremist violence of any theatre," in 2022. It accounted for 7,899 deaths, more than 40 percent of the continental total of fatalities.<sup>36</sup>

### *"The Islam of the armed groups is not the Islam of our brothers"*

**Burkina Faso** has become a main theatre for jihadist operations experiencing a "69-percent increase in militant Islamist extremist-linked fatalities totalling 3,600 deaths" in 2022 alone.<sup>37</sup> Led mainly by groups linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, these have killed thousands of people and displaced over 1.9 million<sup>38</sup> with jihadist groups controlling more than 40 percent of the country.<sup>39</sup> According to Catholic Bishop Laurent Dabiré, "The country is being attacked by diverse groups that use Islam for propaganda or for mobilization. The Islam of the armed groups is not the Islam of our brothers. The Muslims of Burkina are themselves targets."<sup>40</sup>

Endemic violence first visited **Mali** in 2012 when jihadist groups seized control of the north. Here the state is virtually absent, free rein for battles between Islamic State and al-Qaeda-linked extremists (JNIM) as well as with non-jihadist, predominantly Tuareg, rebels.<sup>41</sup> A new front has opened in central Mali inflicting human rights abuses on civilians caught in a web of violence between the military, mercenary forces including the Russian Wagner group, and the onslaught by jihadists. According to Catholic clergy, armed groups near Mopti banned alcohol and pork, and forced women of all faiths to wear veils. Christian communities near Didja reported Shari'a being imposed, and being compelled to learn the Qur'an and Islamic prayers.<sup>42</sup>

The **Lake Chad Basin** at the intersection of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, remains the third most deadly region in Africa, "comprising 20 percent of all militant Islamist extremist-linked fatalities."<sup>43</sup> Boko Haram and Islamic State

West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue to carry out attacks against military and civilians with **Chad** suffering from persistent humanitarian challenges with more than one million people displaced, and food insecurity following missed harvests affecting more than 5.3 million people.<sup>44</sup>

In **Nigeria**, although Boko Haram was weakened with the death of its leader Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, the group continued indiscriminate attacks against military and civilians recording a 57 percent increase in violent attacks and a 70 percent jump in fatalities in north-west Nigeria, Chad and south-eastern Niger.<sup>45</sup> Boko Haram's main splinter group, ISWAP, not only attacked security forces and civilians in the north-eastern Borno State, but expanded to include Kano, Kogi, Niger, and Taraba states.<sup>46</sup> Contrary to Boko Haram's kill and loot approach, ISWAP implements a form of governance over territory invaded encouraging civilian trade, imposing taxation and "settling local disputes through Sharia courts." The "punishment of cattle rustlers" has, according to the International Crisis Group, "won the group a degree of acceptance from locals" and is likely to grow and expand.<sup>47</sup> In the predominantly Muslim north, Christians face systemic discrimination including: exclusion from government positions, abduction and forced marriage of Christian women by Muslim men, no authorizations granted for church or chapel constructions, and the imposition of the Muslim hijab on all female students in all secondary schools.<sup>48</sup>

### *"Among the various traditions, the Christian community is the most targeted"*

**Cameroon** struggles with sectarian conflict as well as external terrorist threats. Internal challenges are focused on the anglophone crisis, factional violence between anglophones and francophones in Cameroon's north-west and south-west regions. Furthermore, Cameroon's Far North region has been destabilized by violence from competing armed extremists such as Boko Haram and the splinter group ISWAP. Among the various traditions, the Christian community is recognized as the most targeted with reports of jihadists abducting "numerous civilians, including Christian women and girls who were often sexually abused and forced into marriage with Muslim men."<sup>49</sup>

**Niger** confronts armed conflict, population displacement and food insecurity along its borders with Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Libya. The nation witnessed a 43 percent increase in violent events in 2022.<sup>50</sup> Hostilities erupted because of ethnic disputes and competition over resources, but also from attacks by jihadist groups linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State, and Boko Haram from Nigeria.

In **Somalia**, al-Shabaab controls large swaths of territory imposing their own interpretation of Islam and Shari'a on both Muslims and non-Muslims. This includes a ban on all forms of media, entertainment, smoking, and any behaviour deemed as un-Islamic, such as shaving beards. The small number of



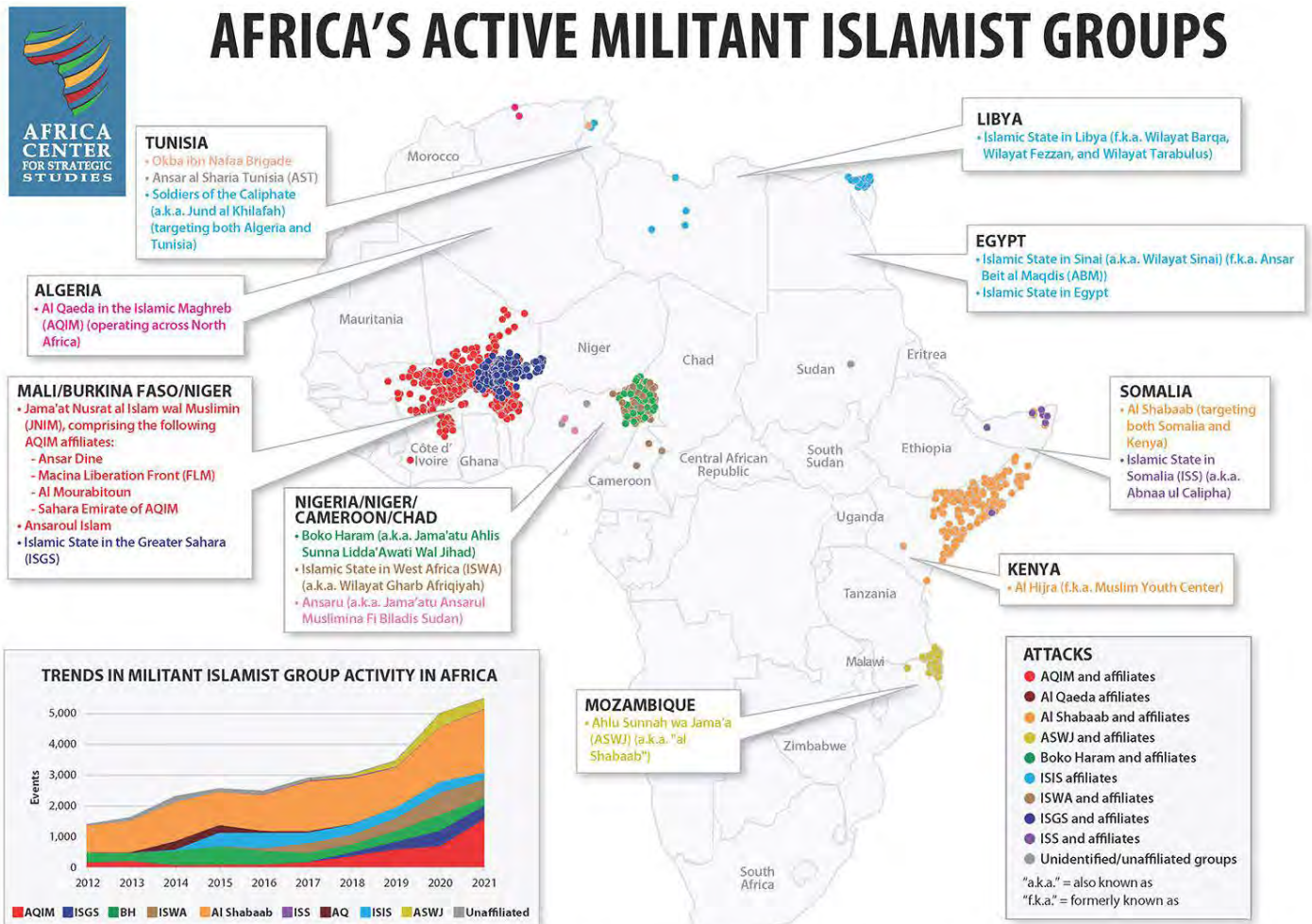
non-Muslim believers are largely Christian converts from Islam. Conversion is seen as a betrayal to family and community; an individual even suspected of conversion is likely to face harassment, intimidation or even murder.<sup>51</sup>

Although al-Shabaab lost domination over some territory in **Kenya**, the group remains consolidated in the area launching sporadic attacks. The government's anti-terrorism activities are allegedly disproportionately targeting Muslims, driven by societal fear and political frustration; the largest contingent of foreign fighters in al-Shabaab are Muslim Kenyans with jihadists often targeting state institutions.<sup>52</sup>

With regards to the Southern Africa subregion, insurgency at-

tacks increased in **Mozambique** by an ISIS affiliated jihadist group called Ahlu Sunnah wa Jama'a (ASWJ) – known locally as al-Shabaab (no relation to Somalia's al-Qaeda-affiliate, al-Shabaab) and internationally as IS-Moz. According to a report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, IS-Moz numbers "at least 1,000 militants" attempting to capture Cabo Delgado to establish "an Islamist extremist extremist break-away regime."<sup>53</sup> Reported violent incidents in 2022 – killings, abductions, looting, and destroying property – increased by 29 percent. These attacks were notable as violence was mainly directed against civilians (Christians and Muslims) accounting for 66 percent of all violent events, more than any other region on the continent.<sup>54</sup> To date, more than a million people are internally displaced.<sup>55</sup>

A 70 percent annual increase in violent events linked to militant Islamist extremist groups in the Sahel drove extremist violence in Africa to record levels in 2021.





### ***Jihadists target religious leaders as coercive tools to spread fear***

In the Great Lakes region, at the borders of Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Uganda, competition for mineral resources has resulted in ferocious violence and horrific human rights abuses. Estimates indicate up to 122 armed groups are active in **DRC** alone<sup>56</sup> where, particularly in the northern and eastern parts of the country, militias such as M23 (March 23 Movement) and jihadists such as the Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF - an ISIS African branch) terrorize the population and target religious leaders as coercive tools to spread fear. From April to June 2022, the UN recorded nearly 1,000 civilian deaths, with 700,000 displaced in all of 2022.<sup>57</sup> In **Uganda**, several attacks by the same ADF were reported, especially in the east of the country where extremists threaten the Christian population and target churches.

In addition to gold, timber and diamonds, **Central African Republic** (CAR) is home to so-called rare earth minerals essential for the digital economy.<sup>58</sup> On June 30, 2022, the CAR Catholic Bishops Conference denounced all actors involved in the violence including guerrilla groups, Russian mercenaries, Rwandan soldiers, and the Central African Armed Forces.<sup>59</sup> The bishops condemned the horrors inflicted including “human and material destruction, abuse, rape and violation of human rights, destruction of property [and] places of worship, and exploitation of religious beliefs.”<sup>60</sup>

The most significant development in **Ethiopia** in the period under review was the start of the civil war in the country’s northern Tigray region. While not religiously motivated, reports indicated that Eritrean and Ethiopian troops attacked both churches and mosques. Violence against religious communities included an attack on Muslims during the funeral of a prominent local sheik in Gondar in April 2022, though perhaps the nadir of the conflict was the massacre of reportedly up to 800 people at the Orthodox Maryam Tsiyon Church in Aksum.<sup>61</sup> As for **Eritrea**, the regime ruled by the unelected president, Isaias Afewerki, emphasizes “martyrdom for the nation” and decrees that citizens live accordingly.<sup>62</sup> It is a dictatorship in which most human rights, including religious freedom, are non-existent.

### **Working towards peace**

Notwithstanding the tensions and violence, it is also important to state the constructive interreligious efforts. Of note were the visits of Pope Francis to DRC and South Sudan in January and February 2023 in which he called upon leadership in both countries to work towards peace.

Among the myriad of national efforts, in **Cameroon**, government officials joined 60 Muslim and Christian clerics and hundreds of Muslims and Christians in the capital, Yaoundé, to pray for peace during the Africa Football Cup of Nations.<sup>63</sup>

In the **Ivory Coast**, Christian and Muslim religious leaders gathered in Abidjan for an international symposium under the title “The Eternal Message of Religions” in which a common declaration was agreed that “solidarity, fraternity and dialogue among all religions must be the very basis of social peace.”<sup>64</sup>

In **Central African Republic**, an interfaith group called the Platform of Religious Confessions of Central Africa united the religious leaders of the country’s Muslim, Evangelical, and Catholic communities. Together the leaders courageously travelled to the front lines to reopen dialogue between armed groups and elected officials.<sup>65</sup>

### **Long-term risks**

According to the UN’s World Food Program, displacement across the Sahel (the nations of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) over the past three years has “increased by almost 400 percent.”<sup>66</sup> In the same region during the same period, the number of people facing starvation “has skyrocketed from 3.6 to 10.5 million.”<sup>67</sup>

If left unchecked, the cycle of violence, displacement, and famine will continue to degrade provoking further long-term consequences including deeper intercommunal rifts, economic decline, political instability, and the rendering destitute of millions. Although Muslims and Christians are equally victims to extremist violence, with the growing Islamist extremist radicalization, Christians tend to increasingly become a specific target for the terrorists, eliminating the characteristic religious pluralism – and harmony – of the region.

## CASE STUDY

# DR Congo: smartphones, rare-earths, and jihadist violence



© Thomas Oswald / ACN

About 70 percent of the world's cobalt, an essential metal necessary to produce lithium-ion rechargeable batteries for electric cars and computers, is mined in eastern DR Congo.<sup>68</sup> More than a quarter of the world's tantalum (extracted from coltan ore) used in smartphones is mined in eastern DR Congo.<sup>69</sup> The greatest concentrations of the country's extremist and jihadist militias, and violent attacks, are in eastern DR Congo.

The situation is complex, a transnational war economy involving political, economic, ethnic, and religious interests with terrorism reaching levels constituting crimes against humanity. Over the past 10 years, the battle to control the coltan mines has taken the lives of over four million Congolese.<sup>70</sup>

**The number of terrorist groups has grown from a few dozen in 2006 to approximately 120 today.**<sup>71</sup> Rebel factions such as M23 and jihadists such as the Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF – claimed by ISIS as Islamic State Central Africa Province) commit atrocities against the population with impunity. From April to June 2022 alone, the UN recorded nearly 1,000 civilian deaths; in all of 2022 over 700,000 civilians were displaced.<sup>72</sup> Increasingly, extremists are targeting religious leaders and places of worship.

The Catholic Church has been an outspoken critic and advocate for the victims. In April 2021, the bishops highlighted the goals of the terrorists stating they are “exploiting the weaknesses of the regular armed forces in order to achieve their political and religious goals,” which include “the occupation of the land, illegal exploitation of natural resources, gratuitous self-enrichment and the Islamization of the region without regard for religious freedom.”<sup>73</sup>

The worldwide technology-driven need for cobalt is estimated to grow by 60 percent by 2025.<sup>74</sup> The attacks in DR Congo, including jihadist violence, are not anticipated to abate.

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A Congolese mineworker extracting coltan (Columbite-Tantalite) in a tin mine near the village of Nzibira in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The rare metallic ore is a core element used in the production mass consumed electronic goods.



## REGIONAL ANALYSIS

# Mainland Asia

Mainland Asia is home to nations that host some of the world's worst religious freedom violations. Within East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Subcontinent, the countries that experienced the most severe religious restrictions during the period under review included China, India, Nepal, North Korea, Vietnam, and Myanmar.

In **China**, the population of 1.4 billion people continues to suffer the most serious restrictions on religious freedom since the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), intent on carrying out its campaign of 'sinicization' of religion – requiring all religions to adhere to the Chinese Communist Party's ideology, doctrine, and teachings – resumed its intense crackdown on religious communities. The tools used to track and arrest its citizens, including ethnic and religious minorities, feature leading edge surveillance technologies, of note the approximately 540 million CCTV cameras countrywide<sup>75</sup> – many replete with facial recognition capability – which are becoming increasingly refined. Although all faith groups reported increasing pressure, the Muslim Uyghur population continue to suffer intense persecution facing arrests for religious practices and the closure and the destruction of mosques. It is estimated that at least one million Uyghurs are held in detention camps and as many as 880,000 Muslim children have been separated

from their parents; campaigns of forced abortions and sterilization were also reported.<sup>76</sup> China also continued its threats to invade Taiwan by launching live fire-war drills in August 2022 following a visit by the former United States Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. If an invasion were to occur, the fate of Taiwanese Christians would be a major concern.

**India**, like China, also has a population of 1.4 billion and is the world's largest democracy. Ruled by the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the government espouses that India's national and cultural identity are essentially Hindu. The freedoms of religious minorities, especially Christians and Muslims, are severely undermined and especially the practice of religious conversion and cow slaughter invite severe repercussions.<sup>77</sup> The BJP also supports restrictions on religious freedom through the Freedom of Religion Acts (or anti-conversion laws). These are state-level statutes designed to regulate non-Hindu religious conversions allegedly accomplished through forcible and fraudulent means. Currently 12 Indian states have either passed or are considering passing these laws. The most recent of these is the southern state of Karnataka, which ratified an anti-conversion law in September 2022,<sup>78</sup> and Uttarakhand<sup>79</sup> which strengthened its laws in November 2022 introducing a ten-year jail term for those

found guilty of engaging in forced religious conversion. India's repression of minorities through the introduction of stringent anti-conversion laws has been copied by the neighbouring Hindu-majority country of **Nepal**, which recently adopted a constitution and a penal code that forbids proselytism and marginalizes non-Hindu communities and organizations.<sup>80</sup> Of concern is the rise of the Hindu nationalist Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), which seeks to re-establish Nepal as a Hindu state.<sup>81</sup> The data from India, Nepal, and other countries in this region suggests that ethno-religious nationalism continues to be a dangerous pattern in Mainland Asia.

Other authoritarian governments in Mainland Asia that also repress religious freedom through brutal religious control are those in North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos. **North Korea**, recognized as the world's most isolated nation, has one of the world's worst human rights records and is repeatedly documented as the country where faith groups suffer "extreme persecution."<sup>82</sup> North Korea's Songbun system categorizes citizens according to their loyalty to the state. Religious believers are automatically classed as "hostile" and "subjected to severe repression."<sup>83</sup> In **Vietnam**, the Hmong and Montagnard Christians continue to suffer systemic discrimination as well as persecution, and Christians in **Laos** also faced attacks by mobs and demands by the authorities to denounce their faith, with severe repercussions if met with refusal.

Mainland Asia also is home to many Buddhist-majority countries, particularly Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. The military coup of February 1, 2021, in **Myanmar**, resulted in a period of intense repression of human rights including freedom of religion. Fuelled in part by an ethno-religious nationalist ideology, at least 132 churches and religious buildings were destroyed since the start of the coup.<sup>84</sup> Further to this there was a significant rise of anti-Muslim hate speech and anti-Muslim violence, in addition to the ongoing genocide of the Rohingyas. Building on the chaos created by the severe political and economic crises, Buddhist nationalist organizations in **Sri Lanka** are becoming more numerous, extremist, and powerful. Casting all non-Buddhists of whatever ethnicity and religious tradition – Muslims, Hindus, and Christians – as existential threats to Buddhism, the groups provoke an extremist response among Muslim and Hindu minority communities threatening to destroy Sri Lanka's shared national identity.<sup>85</sup> **Thailand** continues to face conflict in the southern border provinces, driven especially by the Islamic separatist movement, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). Various attacks occurred and although numerous truces were attempted, a ceasefire and negotiations are still pending.

Recent events, as well as a continuance of past conflicts, demonstrate that the region is still volatile and shows significant religious persecution. Particularly authoritarian governance, a

deepening ethno-religious nationalism (inclusive of anti-conversion laws and discriminatory legislation), Islamic extremism, and a significant escalation in the persecution of religious minorities continue to worsen and dampen any prospects for religious freedom in the region.





## CASE STUDY

# India: Laws controlling religious demographics



India, with its population of over 1.4 billion, has become a centre and breeding ground for religious nationalism. The country, currently ruled by the Hindu nationalist political party the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), maintains that Indian culture and identity are rooted in Hinduism. Fears of a rapid growth in non-Hindu religious groups (particularly Islam),<sup>86</sup> have resulted in these faith communities, mostly Christian and Muslim, suffering systemic discrimination and, in many cases, being denied basic civil liberties.

In addition, accused of forcibly converting Hindus to another faith, political groups such as the nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which consider Hindu culture and values at risk, propagate the introduction of anti-conversion laws and reconversion initiatives such as Ghar Wapsi (homecoming). Although Ghar Wapsi also targets Christian converts, it is zealously driven by allegations that Muslim men lure Hindu women into marriage and conversion to further the growth of Islam, commonly referred to as “Love Jihad.” RSS and allies hold Ghar Wapsi events focused primarily on enticing the lower castes (known as Dalits) with financial incentives to reconvert to Hinduism.

Overshadowing the reconversion initiatives is the spread of anti-conversion laws, or Freedom of Religion Acts, at the root of numerous instances of persecution. Those Muslims or Christians accused of engaging in religious conversion face up to ten-year jail terms and have been subjected to brutality by local vigilantes. Currently, 12 Indian states have either passed or are considering passing anti-conversion laws.

The reconversion tribulations and the introduction of discriminatory anti-conversion legislation not only entrench the anti-Muslim sentiment of the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) but also open the door to a myriad of violations of fundamental rights. Denounced as undermining India’s secular constitution, the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended India as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act.<sup>87</sup>

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Crowds gather for the Kumbh Mela Religious Festival (at the Shastri Bridge) in Prayagraj, India, 2019.

## BACKGROUND

# Is there Only One Buddhism?

Buddhism, one of the world's oldest sets of beliefs, is both a religion and a philosophy and counts some 400 million followers. It originated in India between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC from the teachings of Siddharta Gautama, or Buddha, and spread initially throughout mainland Asia. Today Buddhism remains prevalent in three countries: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and China.

Buddhism developed during a period of intense social upheaval and religious fervour.<sup>88</sup> Buddhist teachings are based on the Triratna, or “three jewels”: Buddha (the teacher), Dharma (the teaching), and Sangha (the community).<sup>89</sup> Following the death of its founder, Buddhism branched out into two main groups, the Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada Buddhism (way of the elders) is the more conservative of the two and focuses on the development of ethical conduct, meditation, and insight-wisdom by emphasizing a more rigorous observance of the monastic code. Theravada is practised mainly in southern Asia, including Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. Mahayana Buddhism (the great vehicle) focuses on looking inward and relying on the philosophy of intuition. Mahayana is practised mainly in Tibet, Nepal, China, Korea, and Japan.<sup>90</sup>

In Sri Lanka, Theravada Buddhism is practised by the Sinhalese majority who consider the country as a chosen land – it is said that the most important sacred texts were first written in Sri Lanka and that Buddha himself consecrated the island for the defence and propagation of Buddhism. While followers of the religion mostly practise philanthropy and perform important roles during times of crisis, tragically, radical groups promoting Buddhist supremacy have exercised an increasing influence on politics.<sup>91</sup> Hate-filled preaching and online rhetoric have provoked violent attacks on both Christians and Muslims as nationalist Sinhalese-Buddhists perceive both religions as a threat. Christians face difficulty in registering places of worship and several churches have been forcefully shut down. The Easter Sunday bombings in 2019 inflamed anti-Muslim sentiment among Buddhist extremists, which further incited hatred towards Muslims, especially in social media. This has resulted in an increase in discrimination towards Muslims including revenge attacks on homes, businesses, and mosques (*cf. Sri Lanka country report*).





In Myanmar, as in Sri Lanka, the majority practice Theravada Buddhism, and here too Buddhist beliefs are deeply intertwined with the national culture. Buddhist monks are still esteemed as nationalist symbols for their opposition to colonialism and the Buddhist religion is understood as an indispensable component of Burman ethnic identity and Burmese national identity.<sup>92</sup> The influence of Burmese Vipassana meditation, primarily taught to lay people, has expanded and influenced the practice of Buddhism the world over.<sup>93</sup>

Notwithstanding Buddhism's peaceful expression, as well as the historically positive interreligious relations between faith groups, more recent conditions for Myanmar's Christian and Muslim religious communities have declined dramatically. The military, associated with an extreme Burman Buddhist nationalist agenda<sup>94</sup> intolerant of non-Burman ethnic groups and non-Buddhist religious groups, has cracked down on minority faith communities, the most egregious of which is the genocide of the Rohingya Muslims (*cf Myanmar country report*).

China is home to the world's largest Buddhist population. Chinese Buddhism is a combination of Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism, a native Chinese religion. Chinese Buddhists, who depict Buddha as "fat and laughing,"<sup>95</sup> believe that Buddha was a god, not just a teacher, and pay homage to their ancestors.<sup>96</sup> The socio-political landscape facing all religions in China, however, is changing rapidly. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) "Sinicization" policy, the "adaptation of religions to China's socialist society," often refers to the "indigenization of religious

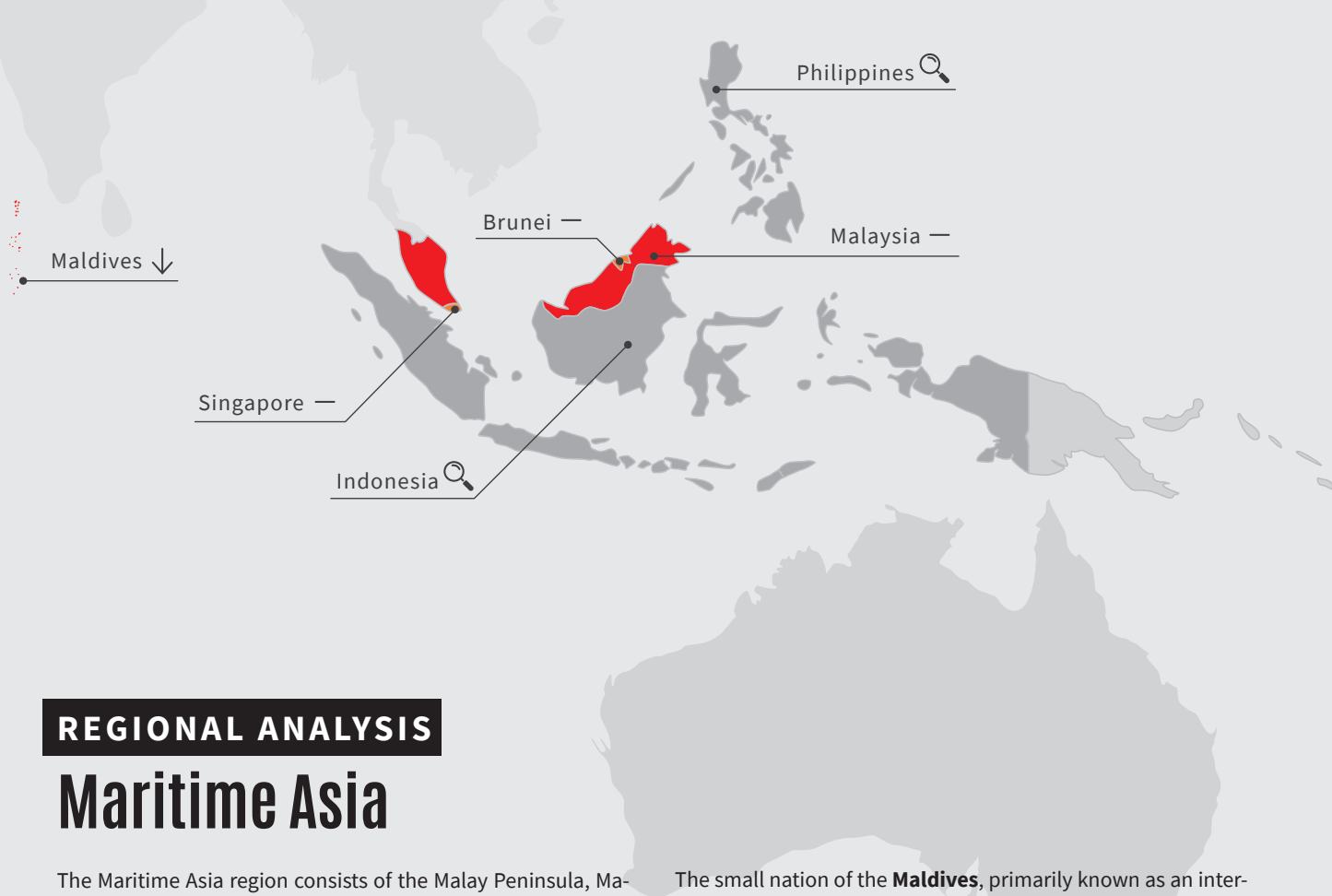
faith, practice, and ritual in Chinese culture and society."<sup>97</sup> For Buddhists, this is most widely recognized through the decades-long crackdown on Tibetan Buddhism. More recently, however, all Chinese Buddhist institutions are under government pressure to accept the CCP ideology dictating religious belief and practice.<sup>98</sup>

Currently, in Western liberal democracies there are various interpretations of Buddhism fashioned to the spiritual needs of modern lifestyles. Some Buddhists neither confirm nor deny the recognition of God,<sup>99</sup> theorizing the way of life is a set of philosophical beliefs based on rational understanding. Others view Buddhism as inclusive of other religions and open to a myriad of interpretations based on one's personal beliefs. Others still reject the concept of a God as originating from fear or find the concept of God to be limiting and that the concept of Nirvana is akin to God in theistic religions.<sup>100</sup> As to the perspective of the Ven. S. Dhammika of the Buddha Dharma Association, he states: "We don't believe in a god because we believe in humanity. We believe that each human being is precious and important, that all have the potential to develop into a Buddha – a perfected human being."<sup>101</sup>

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In Myanmar, it's customary for every young boy to enter a Buddhist monastery as novice monk for at least one week, though some remain for years. Once novices reach adulthood (ages 20-21), they are free to decide whether they want to become fully ordained monks.





## REGIONAL ANALYSIS

# Maritime Asia

The Maritime Asia region consists of the Malay Peninsula, Malay Archipelago, Australia, New Zealand, and the numerous small island nations of the Indo-Pacific Region. Religious persecution continues and serves as the main driver furthering significant conflict and instability in the region, primarily in the form of militant Islam.

The countries in Maritime Asia which exhibit the most severe religious repression continue to be the Maldives and Malaysia, mainly due to extremist Islamic ideology. Although **Malaysia's** constitution protects religious freedom, the rights of religious minorities are constrained by the constitutional and legal privileges granted to Sunni Islam. Ethnic Malays, who represent nearly 70 percent of the population, are forbidden to convert while non-Malays (mainly those of Chinese and Indian origin) remain free to convert. Considerable religious intolerance persists against minority faith groups, and Christians continue to face persecution most recently because of the online resurfacing of a popular book against Christians entitled *Pendedahan Agenda Kristian* (Exposing the Christian Agenda). In the state of Sabah, there were reports that government officials changed the religious identity of Christians to Islam and in Sarawak, a largely Christian state, discrimination is reported against smaller Christian groups who face difficulty applying for grants and obtaining government recognition. On a positive note, however, in 2021, a high court in Malaysia overturned a judgment banning the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims declaring it unconstitutional. Rohingya refugees also continued to face persecution and hostility due to xenophobia, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when they were denied basic social services.

The small nation of the **Maldives**, primarily known as an international tourist destination, recognizes Sunni Islam as the official religion. Thus, the Maldivian claim that 100 percent of the population is Muslim is upheld only by the fact that solely adherents to Sunni Islam can become citizens. The 25 percent of the population who are immigrant non-Muslims have no access to nationality. The Maldives continues to be a notorious recruiting ground for terrorists and random acts of hatred and violence have increased in recent years with multiple assassination attempts on key political leaders, and attempted attacks on primary schools. An incident that caught international headlines occurred in June 2022, when a UN International Yoga Day celebration was interrupted by Islamic fundamentalists who entered the stadium with flags and placards condemning the practice of yoga and shouting "God is Great" in Arabic.

**Indonesia**, the world's largest Muslim nation, has become ever more inhospitable for religious minorities. Placed on the recent US Commission on International Religious Freedom Special Watch List, citizens have increasingly been convicted under the blasphemy law with Christians appearing to receive harsher sentencing than Muslims. On a positive note, there have been some strides by the government to defend the rights of religious minorities. In December 2022, President Jokowi was the first president to attend a Christian service on Christmas Day and in January 2023, the president defended religious minorities and stated that they have the same rights in terms of freedom of religion and worship.



In the Catholic-majority **Philippines**, the militant group Abu Sayyaf continued to conduct violent acts of Islamic extremism. In 2022, the militant group was responsible for planting home-made bombs on the premises of two Catholic churches in Jolo City.

In the small nation of **Brunei**, despite fully implementing Sharia law in 2019, there were some positive reports that the country's imams preached that women's achievements should be celebrated and encouraged them to work outside the home.

Many nations in Maritime Asia continue to be free and peaceful. These include the large island nations of Australia and New Zealand; the majority-Christian nations of Papua New Guinea

and Timor Leste; and the Pacific microstates of Vanuatu, Samoa, Kiribati, Tonga, Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Palau, Tuvalu, Nauru, Fiji Islands, and the Solomon Islands. At the same time, these countries have not been without religious freedom challenges, for example in those nations where discrimination against Muslim minorities persists especially when attempting to register marriages and births. Smaller Pacific nations are also increasingly caught in a geostrategic tug-of-war with China and the United States/Australia due to their location. Australia continues to transfer some of its asylum seekers to an offshore detention centre in Nauru. This has been condemned by human rights groups, as well as by the Catholic bishops in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, deemed a violation of human rights.

## Religious minorities increasingly suffocated by



Terrorist attacks



Mass surveillance



Anti-conversion laws



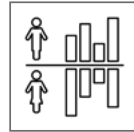
Financial restrictions



Electoral manipulation



Attacks on their culture heritage



Manipulation of population registries



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## BACKGROUND

# Schoolbooks and the future of religious freedom

Dr. Eva Saenz-Diez

In February 2021, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi provoked controversy by ordering education officials to remove Qur'anic verses from all schoolbooks excepting Islamic religion textbooks.<sup>102</sup> Up to this date, passages from the holy book and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad had been integrated within schoolbooks of all subjects. Critics of this Islamic educational policy had long pointed to the discrimination against non-Muslim students – or even students from non-Sunni traditions – required to study and recite the Islamic verses, even if these violated their own religious beliefs in contravention of the Egyptian constitution. Rather than promoting the idea of equality within citizenship, these texts presented Islam as being the “only source of positive virtues and values”<sup>103</sup> and by implication that other religions did not share the same virtues. Non-Muslims and non-Sunni Muslims were thus *de facto* excluded from the historical examples of piety and honourable behaviour.

In an opposing trend, Pakistan continues to bear down on its policy of compulsory Islamic education. In August 2021, then Prime Minister Imran Khan's government introduced the Single National Curriculum (SNC) for primary schools. A feature of the standardized education is the Islamo-centric syllabus, bordering on enforced religious instruction.<sup>104</sup> The SNC has drawn strong criticism from educational experts and human rights defenders for its lack of inclusivity, poor pedagogy, and over-emphasis on Islamic religious content<sup>105</sup> provoking discrimination and negative attitudes towards members of religious minorities from primary school onwards. In the book *Quality Education vs. Fanatic Literacy*, Editor Peter Jacob concludes that in Pakistan “rampant intolerance on the basis of religion and sect is the only imaginable outcome of education policies pursued in the past and present.” He also adds that the exclusion and demeaning of certain groups encourages widespread

abuse,<sup>106</sup> multiplying incidents of such behaviour, accentuating inequalities<sup>107</sup> and sometimes even causing violence.<sup>108</sup>

Muslims constitute India's fastest growing religious community. The population is currently similar to that of Pakistan and demographers calculate that India's Muslim community is expected to overtake Pakistan's becoming the second largest in the world (immediately behind Indonesia).<sup>109</sup> Hindu nationalism has recently become a major theme in Indian politics and this shift is also noticeable in textbooks.<sup>110</sup>

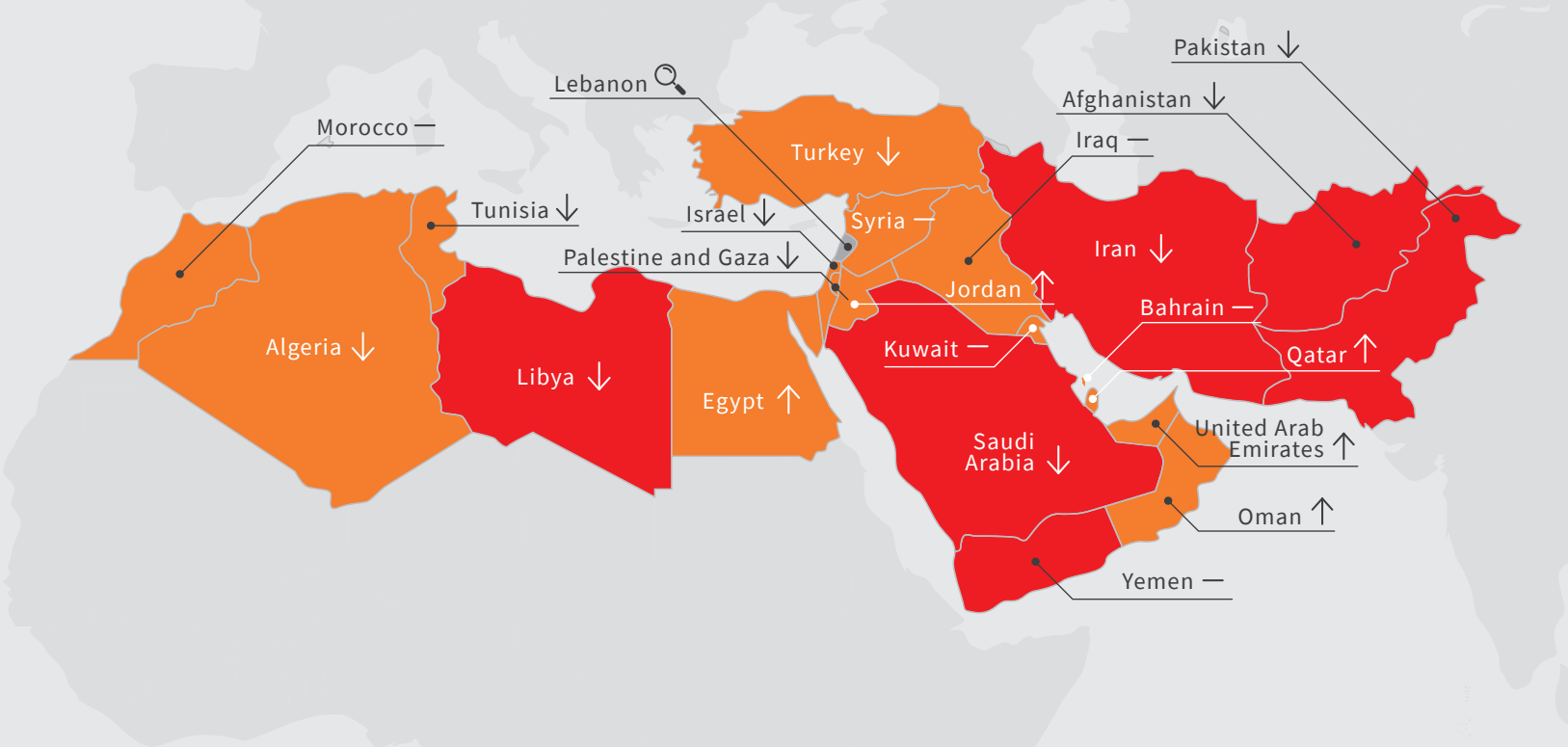
In June 2022, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government removed important sections from social science and history textbooks. Among the revisionism was the deletion from Grade 12 history books of the influence of the ruling Mughals, a medieval Muslim dynasty. Noted Indian professor S Irfan Habib<sup>111</sup> observed that the “diverse races, religions, cultures that descended here over the centuries and got immersed and assimilated into an Indian identity” is a “historical fact.”<sup>112</sup> “However, Hindutva ideologues have already declared who is Indian and who is not, and it is their version of history that will be taught.” Consequently, “the coming generations will grow up totally unaware of these ‘others’ in their textbooks.”<sup>113</sup>

Textbook and wider curricula changes have also occurred in Saudi Arabia. The kingdom has recently removed from its schoolbooks mentions of hadiths inviting hostility towards infidels,<sup>114</sup> references to jihad,<sup>115</sup> and death as the punishment for apostasy.<sup>116</sup> Jordan and Morocco too have recently performed curricula reforms, but they are often considered by analysts as merely cosmetic.

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According to UNICEF, in Nigeria's north-eastern and north-western states, approximately 30 percent of Muslim children receive Qur'anic education, which fails to teach basic skills such as literacy and numeracy.





## REGIONAL ANALYSIS

# Middle East and North Africa

Despite some positive developments in the region compared to the previous period under review, there is still not one Muslim majority country that provides for full freedom of religion. The impact of pandemic restrictions and persistent political instability in some of the larger countries severely curtailed human rights. In most countries where Islam is the official religion, freedom of religion is limited to different degrees of freedom of worship. Over the two-year period several major trends can be identified that, naturally, do not apply to all countries.

### Government gestures towards religious minorities

While comprehensive religious liberty is nowhere to be found in this region, some Muslim majority states have shown greater inclination to recognize that religious pluralism is still a necessary part of the societal mosaic. The Iraqi government, for example, made important gestures towards its Christian and Yazidi citizens. In December 2020, the Iraqi Parliament unanimously recognized Christmas as a national public holiday; in 2021 it passed the Yazidi Survivor Law, acknowledged as an important step to overcome the injustice inflicted upon minorities by ISIS; and in March 2021, Pope Francis, the first pope ever to visit Iraq, was welcomed by the heads of state with interreligious highlights including a meeting with Shi'a leader Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Al-Husayni Al-Sistani.<sup>117</sup> In the same month, Iraq's Prime Minister, Mustafa Al Kadhimi, announced that 6 March would become a "National Day of Tolerance and Coexistence" in Iraq.<sup>118</sup>

Also, in the United Arab Emirates, encouraging signs such as the opening of a Hindu temple or the establishment of the Dubai based Association of Gulf Jewish Communities are of note. In the North of Africa, the results are mixed. In most cases, stringent policies against the practice of any non-Islamic religion remain strictly enforced. Some countries, however, for example Egypt, have more recently taken positive steps such as encouraging greater national unity between Muslims and Christians,<sup>119</sup> interfaith dialogue and tolerance,<sup>120</sup> protecting religious heritage sites, and legalizing hundreds of churches. Deeply rooted social intolerance and institutionalized discrimination against non-Muslims, or those considered as deviant Muslims, however, remain a serious societal problem.

In **Pakistan**, despite Prime Minister Imran Khan promising a New Pakistan (Naya Pakistan) in which "civil, social and religious rights of minorities"<sup>121</sup> were to be guaranteed, religious communities continued to be strongly discriminated against. Examples of civil discrimination are rife including public job advertisements for sanitation workers, street sweepers, and sewer cleaners "reserved for non-Muslims"<sup>122</sup> and flood protection initiatives disregarding Christian and Hindu communities.<sup>123</sup>

Systemic persecution too remains a grave issue, increasing over the two-year period to include: Christian and Hindu girls abducted and sexually enslaved under the pretence of conversion to Islam and marriage to their abductor; blasphemy laws

violating the rights of Hindus, Christians and Muslims (Shi'as the majority jailed) with mobs perpetrating extrajudicial attacks; and an increasingly Islamo-centric education, exacerbated by the recent Single National Curriculum, contributing to discrimination and negative attitudes towards members of religious minorities.

### Islamist extremist terrorism on the rise again

While Islamist extremist terrorism in the region peaked before the period under review with Daesh (the so-called Islamic State) more or less dormant after its defeat as a land holding entity, the jihadist group is again increasingly claiming responsibility for ongoing terrorist attacks in Iraq and Syria. For example, since 2020, the Islamist extremist radicals have stepped up attacks on Shi'a majority areas in **Iraq**. But the group is still far from what it was after 2014 regarding its possibilities and its appeal. The atrocities committed by Daesh alienated many who had previously sympathized with the group, regarding it as a champion of Sunni rights in Iraq and Syria. Other than Daesh, several armed Islamist extremist groups continued to terrorize people of non-Muslim faiths including in north-western **Syria**, where different Islamist extremist factions like Hayat Tahrir al Sham control the Idlib region.

With the seizing power in Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, terrorist activities restarted in **Pakistan**. Numerous atrocities were committed by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) against Christians, Hindus, Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims, of note the March 2022 attack on a Shi'a Mosque in Peshawar, which claimed more than 60 lives.<sup>124</sup>

### Secularizing trends

Several surveys over the two-year period revealed that secularizing trends are growing throughout the region. Already in 2019, the Arab Barometer indicated that generally the practice of faith had diminished and moreover an increasing number of Arab Muslims had lost faith in Islamist extremist parties and their leaders.<sup>125</sup>

Although not an Arab country, **Iran**, is no exception to this development. A 2020 survey found that no less than 47 percent of the interviewees reported "having transitioned from being religious to non-religious."<sup>126</sup> The poll also discovered that, in stark contrast to official census figures, only 32 percent of Iranians identified as Shi'a Muslims. That the demographic basis of the Shi'a regime is eroding became evident in late summer 2022 when protests erupted on an unprecedented scale across the country. This occurred following the death of a 22-year-old woman held in religious police custody for allegedly failing to wear her hijab in full compliance with mandatory requirements. Protesters were not demanding a reform of the current political system but for its outright abolition. The Iranian regime has yet to curb the demonstrations despite the use of violence.

### Tensions in the Holy Land reach worrying levels

Tensions in **Israel** and **Palestine**, ongoing since 2021, have once again spiralled into a vicious cycle of terrorism and counterterrorism. While Israel's right to self-defence against Islamist extremist terror groups like Hamas is undisputed, some countermeasures were criticized as disproportionate by Catholic leaders.<sup>127</sup> Additionally, the social cohesion between extremist Orthodox Jews and secular Jews is further disintegrating.

In 2021, Israel faced civil warlike scenarios between Jews and Muslims in some of its cities. The Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif in Jerusalem was a focal point of hostilities between Hamas and other violent Islamist extremist groups claiming to protect the site against alleged Jewish attempts to change the status quo. Also in the same year, relations with Christians have considerably worsened. In an unprecedented manner, Christian leaders warned that extremist Jewish groups were driving Christians out of the Holy Land.<sup>128</sup> The then Israeli government dismissed the accusations.

The incoming Israeli government under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu introduced radical and anti-pluralistic Jewish politicians into the administration responsible for Israel's Jewish identity.<sup>129</sup> Prospects for the easing of interreligious tensions are thus poor.

These internal tensions limit the value of diplomatic normalization efforts between the Jewish State and Muslim majority countries across the region that started with the so-called Abrahamic Accords in 2020. For example, in the United Arab Emirates, Jewish life is flourishing since the accords.<sup>130</sup> But the normalization at a political level will not be followed by a societal rapprochement as long as the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians remains unresolved.

### Socio-economic living conditions worsening

While the legal framework regarding religious freedom and its actual application are most important, the survival of religious minorities also depends on the socio-economic living conditions. And these conditions have worsened or show no signs of improvement. **Lebanon** is a case in point. According to the World Bank, Lebanon is almost three years into an unprecedented economic and financial crisis that has been described as among the worst the world has seen.<sup>131</sup> Home to the largest Christian population, it has for centuries been a centre of Christian culture in the region, and a highly important base for independent media and academia. The current economic and political turmoil, therefore, not only negatively affects the situation of Christians in Lebanon but also throughout the whole region. Like Lebanon, inflation has impacted neighbouring war-torn **Syria**, with the already dire living conditions of people further deteriorating due to rising prices for essential

goods and rationing.<sup>132</sup> And, although prospects are better in **Iraq** due to rising oil prices,<sup>133</sup> Christians continue leaving the country at a rate of 20 families a month.<sup>134</sup>

### Conclusion

Perhaps thanks to repeated visits by Pope Francis in the region, the situation of religious freedom has not become worse, but there is little room for optimism despite some positive developments. The Middle East and North Africa region remains precarious, and legal progress towards full religious liberty is

minimal, if there is progress at all. Some countries, like Pakistan since the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, have regressed in matters of human rights with full persecution against minorities persisting in both Afghanistan and Iran.





## CASE STUDY

# Lebanon: The Christian exodus



© Ismael Martínez Sánchez / ACN

With demand for new passports reaching 8000 applications per day,<sup>135</sup> on April 29, 2022, Lebanese authorities stopped issuing passports.<sup>136</sup> Less than a year later, with applications 10 times higher than in previous years, the official online platform to issue or renew passports was also shut down.<sup>137</sup>

Explanations by authorities to the challenges of keeping up with the demand, however, masked a far deeper concern – the speed at which well-educated and highly skilled professionals were leaving the country.<sup>138</sup> At least 77,000 Lebanese left in 2021, almost three-quarters between the ages of 25 and 40.<sup>139</sup>

Lebanon is in freefall. In 2019, the middle class represented 57 percent of the population<sup>140</sup> but since then the Lebanese pound has lost more than 97 percent of its value,<sup>141</sup> food prices have increased by 1700 percent<sup>142</sup> and 90 percent of the population lives in poverty.<sup>143</sup> Citizens have difficulty buying food, Lebanese hospitals are running out of medicines, and teachers have left in droves.<sup>144</sup> The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization estimates 2.26 million people – 1.46 million Lebanese and around 800,000 refugees – are in a “crisis” requiring urgent assistance.<sup>145</sup>

The reasons are multiple, complex, and mutually reinforcing. The World Bank and the UN accuse Lebanon's political and financial leaders of abusing their position and driving the country's population into poverty;<sup>146</sup> the pro-Iranian Shiite political party Hezbollah, one of Lebanon's most influential non-state actors, sways domestic and foreign policies to their gain;<sup>147</sup> and crime rates have risen with mafia gangs carrying out armed robberies and murder, and thieves stealing anything of value from cemetery iron fencing to weapons.<sup>148</sup>

The young see no future. A 2021 survey indicated 75 percent of the youth, mostly Christians, wanted to leave.<sup>149</sup> An indigenous community with a millenary presence, these represent professionals such as doctors, journalists, and lawyers, playing an indispensable role in the country's identity including its political composition and diversity.

The prospects for the future are dark. A Christian exodus will not only severely impact the stability, but potentially the survival of the country extinguishing an important sign in the Middle East – a democratic society where different religious communities coexist in peace.

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Street art on the wall next to St George's Cathedral in Beirut, Lebanon.

## BACKGROUND

# Compelled Speech

By Roger Kiska & Mark von Riedemann

Article 18(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>150</sup> provides the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Article 19 provides for the freedom of expression. Both articles define the limits of these rights: respecting public safety, order, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. The key in policy is the balance between the right and the limitation.

Within recent decades, western cultures have witnessed a rising wave of new anthropological norms and concepts increasingly invoked as human rights based on values of tolerance and equality. Many of these new concepts about the human being have not only started to redefine the national identity and foreign policy of several OSCE countries, but in some cases, laws have been introduced such as hate speech to legally enforce and entrench these concepts as new rights.

These enforcements carry serious implications for individuals and communities whose religious or moral beliefs dissent from

the new norms; traditional rights of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion become marginalized when expressions of religious beliefs are categorized as hateful, and therefore something to be maligned or punished.

Language is the key – dictating the definitions of the new concepts frames the discussion. As Lewis Carroll famously wrote in *Through the Looking Glass*: “When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”<sup>151</sup>

The consequence is that in an increasingly framed discourse, speech and ideas in the public space become progressively “compelled” through group think, cancel culture and, in the most serious of circumstances, criminal sanction.<sup>152</sup> Recent legal decisions are testing these waters.





In Canada, in what arguably could be called an example of state-mandated identity politics, the British Columbia Supreme Court issued Practice Direction 59.<sup>153</sup> Released on December 16, 2020, it “advises parties and their lawyers, when introducing themselves in court, to provide their ‘correct pronouns’”; by recognizing self-identified gender pronouns as ‘correct’, the directive implicitly enforces adherence to gender identity belief without regard to religious or conscientious objection.<sup>154</sup>

In Malta, parliament continues to deliberate two pieces of legislation titled Bill 96/97, nicknamed the “equality bills.” Advocates state the proposed laws “would prohibit discrimination and promote equality on a wide range of activities.”<sup>155</sup> Religious and civic groups, however, criticize the legislation suggesting that the vague nature of the language could lead to an individual’s opinion being punished as harassment stifling freedom of conscience (*cf. Malta country report*).<sup>156</sup>

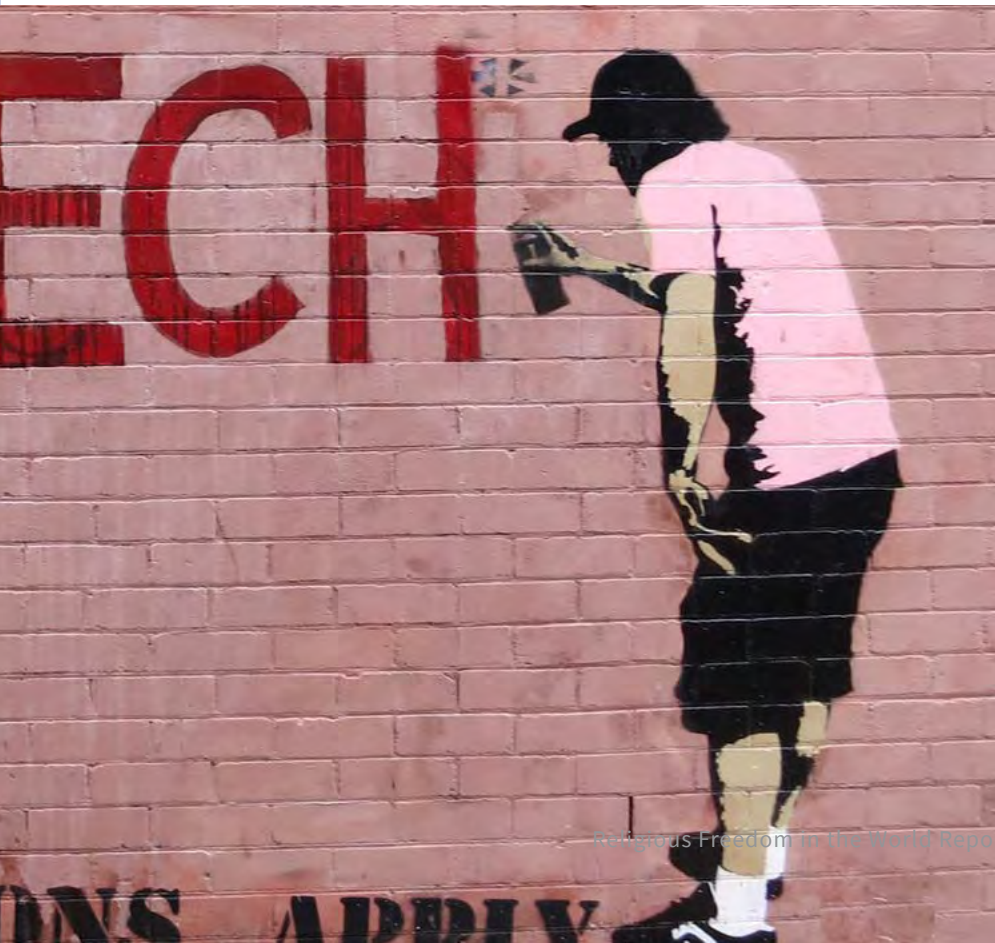
On January 1, 2021, the US House of Representatives proposed changes to the text of Standing Rules for the “Rules of the House of Representatives to alter gender-specific language and replace it with gender-neutral language.”<sup>157</sup> The House approved the new rules on 4 January. Clause 8(c)(3) previously defined “relative” as “father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, [...]” whereas now, the clause defines “relative” as “parent, child, sibling, parent’s sibling ....”<sup>158</sup> In the announcement, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Rules Committee Chairman James P. McGovern stated the intent was to “honour

all gender identities by changing pronouns and familial relationships in the House rules to be gender neutral.”<sup>159</sup>

In November 2022, the UK’s Crown Prosecution Service stated that the Bible contained references “which are simply no longer appropriate in modern society, and which would be deemed offensive if stated in public.”<sup>160</sup> The statement was later retracted.

The result for those religious, or non, in disagreement with the new norms is self-censorship with journalists, politicians, and professors either hesitant to broach sensitive topics, or to adopt wholesale the terms of compelled speech. The contrary, to remain true to the principles of freedom of thought, conscience and religious belief, and the expression thereof, invites a risk of punishment.<sup>161</sup> The result is fundamentally illiberal.

The health of any democracy is measured in how it treats freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The right to bear witness in words and deeds is bound with the very existence of religious convictions.<sup>162</sup> The right to live by one’s conscience is the hallmark of any truly free society. When nations impose cultural values by force, in the process marginalizing those bearing witness to conscience and religious beliefs, the antecedent for more serious persecution is created.



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Street art in Sydney, Australia





## REGIONAL ANALYSIS

# OSCE Countries\*

By Roger Kiska

The countries which are members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) are often divided into those “East of Vienna” and those “West of Vienna.” It has also been described as an organization that stretches “from Vancouver to Vladivostok,” a phrase which denotes not only the geographic spread of the participating states, but also the wide range of ethnicities, religions, and political structures.

The OSCE is comprised of 57 countries including the USA, Canada, Europe (EU, EEA, UK, Switzerland), all the countries of the former Soviet Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

While the OSCE membership carries principally an engagement to promote and protect democracy and human rights, and each country has some form of constitutional protection for religious freedom, the actual application of – and societal respect for – this right varies widely. The OSCE maintains one of the best databases on reported hate crimes in the world.

### The War in Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine. The war is still ongoing at the time of writing. On March 16, 2022, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe voted to expel the Russian Federation from the intergovernmental or-

ganization.<sup>163</sup> On September 16, 2022, the Russian Federation ceased to be a party to the European Convention on Human Rights, meaning that it is no longer subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>164</sup> The Council of Europe reported that 2,129 judgments and decisions had yet to be fully implemented by Russia and remained pending before the Committee of Ministers.<sup>165</sup> Nevertheless, Russia remains a member of the OSCE.

\*Regional assignments are defined not only by geographic convention, but also by their shared approach to religious freedom and other fundamental rights

### Anti-Muslim hate crimes

Evidence of anti-Muslim sentiment continued in many parts of the region during the reporting period. Hate crimes included violent attacks against persons, online threats in social media, and attacks against religious buildings. Mainly Muslim women were victims of harassment, derogatory insults, and violence, often in public places, due to their clothing.<sup>166</sup> Examples include the attack against a seven-month pregnant Muslim woman at a station near Florence, Italy, by a man who ripped off her burqa and pushed her off the train together with her 11-year-old son.<sup>167</sup>

## Anti-Christian hate crimes

Most anti-Christian hate crimes were manifested as either attacks against religious leaders and faithful, or as vandalism and desecration of places of worship. These were witnessed in several traditionally Christian European countries including in France, Spain, and Austria (*cf. respective country reports*). France was shocked in August 2021 by the murder of a 61-year-old Catholic priest, Fr Olivier Maire, killed in Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre.<sup>168</sup> Religious structures in France were targeted so often that in February 2022, the Interior Ministry promised increased security funding for Catholic churches after a series of attacks including at the Saint-Denis cathedral outside Paris (smashed windows and doors), in Bondy and Romainville in the Paris region, (theft and profanation of the tabernacle in both), in Vitry-sur-Seine (profanation and theft), in Poitiers (statues of saints destroyed), and in Paray-le-Monial (theft of relics).<sup>169</sup> In Spain and Austria hate crimes included violent assaults on religious personnel and faithful<sup>170</sup>, insulting graffiti on Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical churches, desecration of tabernacles and vandalism such as the beheading of Catholic statues<sup>171</sup>, and the burning of a church.<sup>172</sup>

## Anti-Semitism

The pervasiveness of anti-Semitism in the OSCE region continues to be of concern (*cf. respective country reports*). Anti-Semitic hate crimes reported in OSCE countries increased from 582 in 2019 to 1,367 in 2021. Germany saw a sharp increase in anti-Semitism with 582 reported hate crimes in 2019 and 1,357 in 2021, leading the government to create a new national strategy to combat the problem. Germany, however, is not alone: Austria saw a sharp rise in anti-Semitic attacks, in France attacks on Jewish people and property rose sharply, and in Scandinavia the Nordic Resistance Movement continued to commit grave acts of anti-Semitism.

## Radicalization of Islam in Central Asia

The rise of extremist Islam, heightened after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, caused significant disquiet in the region with governments tightening regulations over fears of radicalization. In Uzbekistan, authorities introduced greater controls over religious expression including the obligation on Muslim and non-Muslim communities to install surveillance cameras inside and out, appointing government clerics to supervise the content of Muslim sermons, and police shaving the beards of suspected extremists. In Tajikistan, the government increased prosecution of individuals suspected to be members of banned Muslim extremist groups and added a new section to the criminal code punishing unapproved religious education. Notwithstanding the obligation of the state to counter extremism, international observers expressed concern that vaguely defined language in recent counter-terrorism laws have implications for religious freedom (*cf. respective country reports*).

## Ethno-religious Relations

In the Balkans, an ongoing issue of contention exists between competing ethnic groups where ethnicity is often linked with religion. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, most citizens self-identify with one of the country's three main ethnic groups: Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Bosniaks. The European Commission reported that 134 ethnic-related hate incidents were recorded in 2021, and eight convictions were handed down. 70 reports for hate speech were also filed in 2021, with 11 rulings, in which eight convictions were handed down.<sup>173</sup> In the same year, the Press and Online Media Council received 1,073 complaints for online hate speech.<sup>174</sup>

In Cyprus, a case can be made that ethno-religious tensions are perpetuated through religious education. In Greek Cypriot schools, religious education emphasizes Greek Orthodox tradition and Greek identity, whereas in Turkish Cypriot schools the focus is on the Sunni tradition and Turkish identity.<sup>175</sup>

By contrast, in Albania where religious identity is also largely divided along ethnic lines, religious tolerance between the Islamic Community and the Orthodox and Catholic Churches remains one of the central pillars of stability within Albanian society.<sup>176</sup>

## Hate Speech and Compelled Speech

One of the growing areas of tension particularly prevalent among the OSCE member states "West of Vienna" has been the complicated interplay between tackling speech aimed at degrading, marginalizing, or endangering groups of people because of their identifying characteristics, often referred to as hate speech, and the censorship or punishment of what traditionally would be viewed as free speech. Part of the challenge lies in the relatively vague definition of hate speech.

Finland is representative of just how difficult this interplay can be. The Finnish authorities reported 2,567 hate incidents to the OSCE for the years 2020-2021<sup>177</sup>, a remarkable statistic among OSCE states for a nation with just over 5.5 million inhabitants. However, some of the cases that the authorities deemed hateful raised serious questions as to whether the freedom to manifest religious views about sensitive moral and cultural issues is at risk. The prosecution of Finnish MP Päivi Räsänen for publicly quoting the Bible is a prime example.<sup>178</sup>

A greater challenge to freedom of religion and conscience occurs when authorities regulate speech to cater to popular sentiment. In Canada, in late December 2020, the British Columbia Supreme Court issued Practice Direction 59.<sup>179</sup> The Practice Direction "advises parties and their lawyers, when introducing themselves in court, to provide their 'correct pronouns.'" The result, in practice, may amount to compelled adherence to gender identity belief.<sup>180</sup> In the United Kingdom, refusal to

adhere to new cultural norms relating to preferred pronouns created a potential bar to profession. Dr David Mackereth was dismissed from his job as a disability assessor by the Department for Works and Pensions for suggesting during his training that he could not, as a matter of Christian belief and conscience, use transgender affirming pronouns to prospective service users. He recently lost his Employment Appeal Tribunal petition.<sup>181</sup> In another instance, a Christian teacher in England faces a lifetime ban from teaching by his professional body for having misgendered a pupil during a class assignment.<sup>182</sup>

## Abortion

The area of abortion became particularly contentious during the reporting period. In the United States, following the leak of the *Dobbs v Jackson* decision, a judgment which overturned *Roe v Wade*, hundreds of churches became victims of property attacks. In Sweden, two midwives lost their bid before the European Court of Human Rights after being refused positions as midwives because of their conscientious objection to abortion. The UK saw an increase in the legislation of buffer zones around abortion clinics banning peaceful protest, sidewalk counselling, or silent prayer.





## CASE STUDY

# Finland: Censorship against Scripture

On April 29, 2020, Finland's Prosecutor General filed criminal "hate speech" charges against MP Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland within the crime of "ethnic agitation," a section of "war crimes and crimes against humanity" in the country's criminal code.<sup>183</sup>

The principal crimes were a faith-based Twitter post in 2019 (following a Church leadership decision to sponsor an LGBT event), which referenced verses from the Bible, comments on a 2018 television program, and a 2004 pamphlet intended for members of her Church titled "Male and Female He Created Them" outlining Lutheran teaching on sexuality.<sup>184</sup> The charge against Bishop Pohjola regarded his decision to publish the 2004 pamphlet. The Prosecutor General argued that Räsänen's statements were "likely to cause intolerance, contempt and hatred towards homosexuals."<sup>185</sup>

Over a two-year period, Räsänen attended "a total of thirteen hours of police interrogations about her Christian beliefs, including being frequently asked by the police to explain her understanding of the Bible."<sup>186</sup>

In April 2021, Finland's Prosecutor General charged Räsänen despite strong recommendations by the police not to continue the prosecution, and the fact that Räsänen's statements remained available on Twitter and the Finnish national TV platforms as they did not violate the policies of either.<sup>187</sup>

On March 30, 2022, the case against Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola was unanimously dismissed by the Helsinki District Court. The Court recognized "that while some may object to Räsänen's statements, 'there must be an overriding social reason for interfering with and restricting freedom of expression.' The Court concluded there was no such justification."<sup>188</sup>

In an unusual step, in early April 2022, Finland's public prosecutors announced an appeal of the March 30 verdict. Despite the ordeal, MP Päivi Räsänen stated: "I am ready to defend freedom of speech and religion in the higher courts. The prosecutor's decision to appeal the acquittal verdict may lead to the case going all the way to the Supreme Court, giving the possibility of securing precedent protecting freedom of speech and religion for all Finnish people."<sup>189</sup>

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MP Päivi Räsänen, medical doctor and Finnish Interior Minister (2011-2015), mother of five and grandmother of ten, was put on trial accused of "hate speech" for publicly expressing her opinion on marriage and human sexuality based on biblical principles.

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## CASE STUDY

# Nicaragua: Detained, desecrated and deported



© Inés San Martín/ACN

At 3.00 a.m. on August 19, 2022, national police forced their way into the offices of the diocese of Matagalpa and arrested Bishop Rolando Álvarez together with coworkers in the chancery. Shortly thereafter, the bishop was placed under house arrest. His detention represented the culmination of a sharp increase in government hostility, which began on August 4, with the blocking of all access to the curia for those deemed to be “political agents.”

On February 10, 2023, the court stripped Bishop Álvarez of his citizenship and sentenced him to 26 years in prison. The conviction came one day after the bishop refused to join a group of over 200 political prisoners, including several priests and seminarians charged with “conspiracy,” slated for deportation to the United States. The judge pronounced the bishop a “traitor to the motherland” and found him guilty of “conspiracy against national integrity and spreading fake news through information and communication technology, to the detriment of the State and Nicaraguan society.”<sup>190</sup>

Bishop Álvarez has been an outspoken critic of President Daniel Ortega’s government denouncing the social crisis gripping Nicaragua since 2018.<sup>191</sup> The harsh sentencing of the Bishop represented an escalation in the conflict by the government against the Church, coming on the heels of the March 2022 expulsion of the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, and the forced exile of religious and priests including the Missionaries of Charity, the congregation founded by Saint Mother Theresa of Calcutta.<sup>192</sup>

In the November 2022 report “Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church?,” 396 attacks against the Catholic Church were recorded between April 2018 and October 2022 including desecrations, theft, threats and hate speech.<sup>193</sup> Acts of oppression against members of the clergy were identified as were bans on religious processions, the interruption of liturgical services, and the intimidation of the faithful by police deployments around churches. The government also nationalized a Catholic university and closed the Bishops’ Conference television station as well as at least eight Catholic radio broadcasters.

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Bishop Rolando José Alvarez Lagos, of the Diocese of Matagalpa, amid the ruins of the Caritas building in Sebeco (2018) in Nicaragua, where the Catholic Church suffers persecution from the government of President Daniel Ortega.



## REGIONAL ANALYSIS

# Latin America and the Caribbean

By Paulina Eyzaguirre

The report on religious freedom in Latin America and the Caribbean encompasses research in 33 countries in four zones: North America, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. Fully one third of the countries examined (11) are in South America representing almost 66 percent of the region's population. Each zone is different, and the report's findings reflect more the situation on the continental region rather than on the island nations, given the scale of changes observed.

With similar and relatively homogeneous cultural and historical traditions centred on Christianity, the majority religion, respect for religions and different beliefs as well as interreligious relations between the various denominations have been largely peaceful in Latin America and the Caribbean region.

### Normalization of violence against religion and its representatives

Notwithstanding the present relative peace, respect for religions within certain cultural contexts particularly in South America have been perceptibly changing in recent years; prospects for religious freedom are positive in only two countries, Ecuador and Uruguay. ACN's 2018 and 2020 Religious Freedom in the World Reports noted certain trends such as vandalism against churches, desecration of sacred sites and objects, and attacks against religious persons. This was not necessarily related to religion but moreover the result of common criminality or the consequence of the actions taken by members of the clergy to shield their communities from violence.

The 2022 report, however, noted a considerable spike in incidents by individuals or groups holding certain ideological views intolerant towards the religious beliefs of others. At-

tacks centred largely on the faithful of religious communities (i.e., Catholic and Evangelical) generally by pro-abortion and pro-feminist groups as well as groups promoting gender ideology. Incidents – in several cases crimes – including assaults on religious persons, acts of vandalism, desecration, or offences to religious sentiment were reported in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Haiti, and Mexico.

Of further concern were attitudes demonstrated by certain governments, which appeared to turn a blind eye to the law tolerating attacks on places of worship and believers during public protests by either failing to investigate, or properly prosecute, the perpetrators of the criminal acts. In Chile, the president even pardoned a man convicted of setting fire to the Cathedral of Puerto Montt during a wave of social unrest in 2019, known in Spanish as “estallido social” (social outburst).<sup>194</sup>

During the period under review, 14 members of the clergy were murdered in seven countries: Bolivia, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela. In some cases, the victims died trying to intervene during shootings in connection with ordinary crimes, but in others the growing presence of organized crime in rural areas left men and women religious as the only authoritative figures challenging dangerous trafficking networks, and the last resort for people fleeing from criminals.



## An ever worsening social, economic, and political context

Increasing corruption, organized crime, and growing violence amid serious social, economic, and political crises have contributed to the changing of the religious freedom landscape. In fact, for the first time since the Latin America report was written, one of the region's countries, Nicaragua, has been included in the category of persecution. This is due to the ongoing heavy oppression of the Catholic Church by the Ortega government whose actions include, among others, the expulsion of the apostolic nuncio and religious congregations, forcing priests into exile, stripping religious entities and bodies of their legal status, persecuting and harassing priests, besieging churches, the arbitrary detention of religious leaders and faithful, the shutting down of a Catholic television channel, explicit threats, and insulting religious leaders.

In Cuba and Venezuela, where the situation remains dire, human rights violations and repression continues against dissidents and members of the clergy. These are subjected to aggression, arrests, threats, and defamation in acts of reprisal for their support to opposition groups and for expressing opinions different from those of the government.

Several countries in the region have been in crisis for years with no solution in sight. The most tragic case is that of Haiti, which is experiencing the “worst human rights and humanitarian situation in decades,” according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).<sup>195</sup>

While Cuba and Venezuela continue to suffer acute food and medicine shortages, other socio-political and economic crises are affecting Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru. In short, almost one third of the countries of the region – representing 30 percent of the continent's population – are affected by protests and civil unrest resulting from a cost-of-living crisis, runaway inflation, corruption, a lack of judicial independence and impartiality, political instability, and debates over constitutional reform.

Widespread violence caused by turf wars, corruption and extortion involving gangs, guerrillas, drug traffickers and organized crime remains endemic throughout the region with Colombia, Haiti, Mexico, and Venezuela among the most extreme examples. Both targeted and indiscriminate violence breeds a sense of insecurity which erodes the conditions necessary for citizens to exercise their right to religious freedom.

Due to the instability, emigration is a major concern further weakening the region's socio-economic prospects as it is most often the educated youth who seek better opportunities within Latin America and abroad. The pressure is greatest in those countries that border the crisis-stricken Central American states, and in Mexico because of its border with the United States.

In many Latin American countries where the state is unable to provide adequate social services,<sup>196</sup> for the poor who remain, the Churches continue to play a key role. This is despite the risks to Church personnel providing humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable in impoverished and violent areas, especially in Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Dominican Republic, and Venezuela.

## Controversial new laws

Latin America operates as an echo chamber. When an issue emerges in one country, it almost immediately finds an echo among its neighbours, and spreads across the continent in a domino-like effect. This phenomenon has been witnessed with not only the spread of violent attacks against Church persons and buildings, but also with the introduction of controversial new laws – and implications regarding conscientious objection – regarding issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia, and gender identity among others. For example, plans under review in Costa Rica, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru, include revisions to sex education programs considering new gender identity ideologies. These revisions represent a challenge to the right of parents to educate their children, a direct expression of religious freedom in the educational field.

Finally, restrictions imposed after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic were eased in 2022 and eventually lifted. This was a momentous occasion for the faithful who again, starting in April of that year, took part in Holy Week celebrations in record numbers.



## BACKGROUND

# Religious Celebrations and the Return of Joy

By Paulina Eyzaguirre

After almost two years of forced absence due to Covid restrictions, over 1.5 million Mexicans gathered in celebration at the basilica on December 12, 2021 for the annual Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.<sup>197</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic had closed the basilica for the first time in 500 years. One year later, in December 2022, the government reported that the basilica received more than 11 million pilgrims in one week.<sup>198</sup>

As robust COVID-19 health measures were eased, large crowds of faithful surged to Catholic religious celebrations and pilgrimage shrines throughout Latin America congregating to pray, praise, and proclaim their faith.

Popular religiosity – a lived manifestation of belief characteristic in the continent – is by its very nature public; colourful processions and festivals combine religious celebrations with elements of local culture and traditions expressed with enthusiasm and fervour in streets, avenues, and squares.

In Argentina's Catamarca Province, record crowds joined in the Pilgrimage of the People of God<sup>199</sup> as well as the traditional Way of the Cross inside a prison with the active participation of inmates.<sup>200</sup>

In Holy Week celebrations, performances and living tableaux of passion plays were held in central squares in capitals such as Medellín, Colombia,<sup>201</sup> and Trinidad, Honduras,<sup>202</sup> in Paraguay, the traditional re-enactment of the Way of Our Lady of Sorrow resumed;<sup>203</sup> in villages and towns, passion plays and parish processions were held countrywide in Peru,<sup>204</sup> Costa Rica,<sup>205</sup> Ecuador,<sup>206</sup> Venezuela,<sup>207</sup> and in Puebla, Mexico, where over two thousand police were deployed in anticipation of the 150,000 faithful expected for Holy Week.<sup>208</sup>

Many of these religious celebrations have been placed on the UNESCO list of Intangible Heritage of Humanity. In Guatemala, for example, the Easter celebrations are the product of a cultural fusion between Catholicism and ancestral Mayan beliefs,<sup>209</sup> and the feast of San Roque in Tarija, Bolivia, which includes “64 activities, like Masses, processions, contests, outings, races and festivals”<sup>210</sup> epitomizes the country's religious and cultural heritage.

In Chile, the pilgrimage to the Lo Vásquez Shrine on 8 December as well as the feast of La Tirana honouring the Virgen del Carmen in July are two of the country's most popular celebrations. However, for a third year in a row, the authorities banned La Tirana due to the pandemic.<sup>211</sup> The diocese urged faithful to stay away, but reportedly thousands came defying the order.<sup>212</sup>

The revival of popular religious expressions with, in some cases, even greater fervour following two years of restrictions, is a sign of the profound role public manifestations of faith play in Christian culture. The Church in Latin America is, in some ways, experiencing a springtime of faith – the only exception is in Nicaragua where the government in September 2022 banned public Catholic processions, as well as the commemoration of the anniversary of the translation of the Bible into Spanish, an event celebrated by Evangelical Christians.<sup>213</sup>

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Bishop Giovanni Cefai of the Territorial Prelature of Santiago Apóstol de Huanacán, blessing the faithful in the Sanctuary of Our Lord of Imarrucos in Taraco, Peru, 2022.



© Ismael Martínez Sánchez / ACN



**BACKGROUNDER**

# Towards a more comprehensive Catholic-Muslim dialogue





Catholic-Muslim dialogue during the period under review has become more comprehensive. Visiting Iraq in March 2021, Pope Francis reached out to an Arab-speaking Shi'a majority country for the first time. Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako said that the meeting with Iraq's most prominent Shi'a leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani, was "a turning point in Christian-Muslim relations."<sup>214</sup> According to the Patriarch, Al Sistani said: "You are a part of us, and we are a part of you.' It is a suggestive way of saying that we are brothers."<sup>215</sup>

Until then, apart from Azerbaijan, the Pope had only visited Sunni majority countries. Later in 2022, he also visited Bahrain which – although being ruled by a Sunni dynasty – is a Shi'a majority country. The Pope thus continued his policy of a direct dialogue with Islam, one that he has pursued since the beginning of his pontificate. The highlight was an interreligious meeting in Abu Dhabi in February 2019, when he signed with Grand Imam Ahmed al Tayeb from Cairo's Sunni Al Azhar University "The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together."<sup>216</sup> The paper emphasized freedom of belief.

Although Al Sistani did not sign the Abu Dhabi document, he issued a Fatwa, a religious ruling, according to which Christians should "live like all Iraqis, in security and peace and with full constitutional rights." He added that "the religious authority plays [a role] in protecting them, and others who have also suffered injustice and harm in the events of past years."<sup>217</sup> Given Al Sistani's standing as one of the most revered figures in Shiism, this statement carries considerable significance. A Shi'a analyst said that "Iraqi Christians see Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani's support as more important than their own leaders' support."<sup>218</sup> In March 2023, a Shi'a - Christian conference in Iraq was due to continue the dialogue.<sup>219</sup>

The Pope's visit to Bahrain deepened existing ties with Sunni Islam. One important effect was that the interreligious meeting with the Pope brought Shiites and Sunnis closer together. Addressing present Shi'a scholars directly, Sunni Grand Imam Al-Tayeb encouraged Muslims to "chase away any talk of hate, provocation and excommunication."<sup>220</sup> An equally important hope of the lowering of tensions between Shi'as and Sunnis was the ancillary benefit to non-Muslim religious communities.

While tangible legal or practical changes towards religious freedom might not be immediate, the Pope's dialogue with Islam helps to pave the way for progress by creating an atmosphere of trust.



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Religious leaders at the "Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence" at Al-Fida' Square of Sakhir Royal Palace in Awali, Bahrain, November 4, 2022.

## CATEGORIZATION TABLE

# Global Trends in Religious Freedom

Persecution, hate crimes and religiously-motivated violence.

Discrimination, hate crimes and religiously-motivated violence.


↑ Improved since 2021  
↓ Worsened since 2021  
— No change since 2021

Name of Country in English	Category / Trend	Main Driver of Persecution / Discrimination
Afghanistan	↓	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Bangladesh	↓	Authoritarian Government
Burkina Faso	↓	Islamist Extremism
Cameroon	↓	Islamist Extremism
Chad	↓	Islamist Extremism
China	↓	Authoritarian Government
Comoros	—	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Congo, DRC	↓	Islamist Extremism
Eritrea	↓	Authoritarian Government
India	↓	Authoritarian Government and Ethnoreligious Nationalism
Iran	↓	Authoritarian Government
Korea, North	↓	Authoritarian Government
Libya	↓	Islamist Extremism
Malaysia	—	Authoritarian Government
Maldives	↓	Authoritarian Government
Mali	↓	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Mozambique	↓	Islamist Extremism
Myanmar	↓	Authoritarian Government and Ethnoreligious Nationalism
Nicaragua	↓	Authoritarian Government
Niger	↓	Islamist Extremism
Nigeria	↓	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Pakistan	↓	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Saudi Arabia	↓	Authoritarian Government
Somalia	—	Islamist Extremism
Sri Lanka	↓	Authoritarian Government and Ethnoreligious Nationalism
Sudan	↓	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Turkmenistan	—	Authoritarian Government
Yemen	—	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Algeria	↓	Authoritarian Government
Azerbaijan	↓	Authoritarian Government
Bahrain	—	Authoritarian Government
Brunei	—	Authoritarian Government
Cuba	↓	Authoritarian Government
Djibouti	—	Authoritarian Government
Egypt	↑	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Ethiopia	↑	Islamist Extremism
Haiti	↓	Criminal Organizations
Iraq	—	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Israel	↓	Ethnoreligious Nationalism
Jordan	↑	Authoritarian Government
Kazakhstan	—	Authoritarian Government

Name of Country in English	Category / Trend	Main Driver of Persecution / Discrimination
Kuwait	—	Authoritarian Government
Kyrgyzstan	—	Authoritarian Government
Laos	—	Authoritarian Government
Mauritania	—	Authoritarian Government
Mauritius	↑	Islamist Extremism
Morocco	—	Authoritarian Government
Nepal	↓	Authoritarian Government
Oman	↑	Authoritarian Government
Palestine & Gaza	↓	Authoritarian Government
Qatar	↑	Authoritarian Government
Singapore	—	Authoritarian Government
Syria	—	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Tajikistan	↓	Authoritarian Government
Thailand	—	Authoritarian Government and Islamist Extremism
Tunisia	↓	Authoritarian Government
Turkey	↓	Authoritarian Government
United Arab Emirates	↑	Authoritarian Government
Uzbekistan	↓	Authoritarian Government
Venezuela	↓	Authoritarian Government
Vietnam	↓	Authoritarian Government

**Countries “under observation”:** Countries where newly emerging factors of concern have been observed, with the potential to cause a fundamental breakdown in freedom of religion. These include legal measures against aspects of religious freedom, increasing cases of hate crimes and occasional religiously-motivated violence. (Map: marked with a magnifying glass on Regional Analysis maps)

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA	LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN	MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
Benin	Argentina	Lebanon
Burundi	Chile	<b>OSCE COUNTRIES</b>
Eswatini	Mexico	Belarus
Ghana	<b>MAINLAND AND MARITIME ASIA</b>	Russia
Guinea Bissau	Cambodia	Ukraine
Ivory Coast	Bhutan	
Kenya	Indonesia	
Madagascar	Philippines	
Rwanda		
South Sudan		
Togo		
Uganda		



### All other countries are non-classified

#### EXPLANATORY NOTES

The period under review: May 2020 to November 2022 (inclusive). To read the individual country reports please refer to <https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport>. In assessing the scale of oppression of religious groups, the Editorial Committee and Regional Editors considered factors described in the Methodology and Definitions section. ACN acknowledges that the qualitative nature of the categorization means that there is necessarily a subjective element in such an analysis.







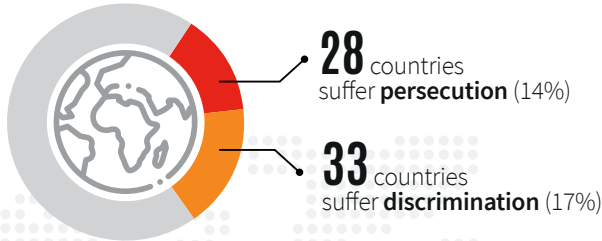
Aid to the  
Church in Need  
ACN CANADA

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD REPORT 2023

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS VIOLATED

Religious Freedom in 196 countries of the world

In **61 countries** there are violations of religious freedom (31.1%)\*



\*That does not mean that all of them are persecuted. In many of them, religious minorities are the most targeted.

**62.5% of the world's population** - almost **4.9 billion** - live in countries with serious or very serious violations of religious freedom\*.



## SINCE 2021, IN AS MANY AS:



In **36 countries**

perpetrators are **rarely or never** prosecuted by the justice system.



**40 countries**

people have been **killed or abducted** for their faith.



**34 countries**

places of worship or religious properties have been **attacked or damaged**.

In **47** of the categorized countries, the situation of

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WORSENE

Only in **9** countries has the situation improved.

## WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS?

**4**  
countries

**Ethnoreligious Nationalism**

Population: 1,5 billion people



**21**  
countries

**Islamist Extremism**

Population: 1,1 billion people



**49**  
countries

**Authoritarian Government**

Population: 4,5 billion people



\* some of these countries are included in more than one group.

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Unless otherwise specified, all country data, religious demography and GDP per capita (PPP adjusted, to allow for comparison between countries) come from the latest available information by: Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, eds. *World Religion Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020). The GINI index figures are the latest available at [www.databank.worldbank.org](http://www.databank.worldbank.org). A GINI indicator measures inequality of income and consumption distribution, a Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality.



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