



# **Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief (2020)**

The APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) is a group of over 130 cross-party parliamentarian members who champion the right to FORB, as outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among their fellow parliamentarians, policy-makers, the media and the general public and pursue effective implementation of policy recommendations relating to this right. Established in 2012, the group benefits from the expertise of 20 human rights and faith-based stakeholder organisations.

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This report has been written and produced with the support of the stakeholder organisations and staff team of the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief. The country profiles were collectively written by the APPG and staff from organisations including the Al-Khoei Foundation, the British Humanist Association, the Catholic Bishops Conference for England and Wales, Mosaic Middle East, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the UK, Open Doors UK & Ireland, Search for Common Ground and worldwatchmonitor.org. With thanks to Gender and Religious Freedom for expertise and inputs on gender issues.

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## FOREWORD

We warmly welcome the release of the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief's Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2020.

This year has been a year of unprecedented challenge, as individuals, families, communities and societies have come together to meet and combat the threat posed to us all by the global COVID-19 pandemic. It is often asserted that religion or belief practices are 'fixed', 'unchanging' and, by implication 'unchangeable' – such assertions sometimes connoting that such beliefs are at best of little relevance or, at worst, are somehow a negative influence, on the world in which we all live and which we all share. On a positive note, this year has shown how untrue this caricature is. As traditional modes of worship or of coming together have had to be set to the side, new ways of doing so have emerged, and have been embraced: the experience of 'lockdowns' has caused many to reflect on what it means to be human, and to explore new ways of understanding themselves and the world around them. We have witnessed an outpouring of innovation and exploration in so many fields, including (unsurprisingly) that of religion or belief. There has been a tremendous amount of flexibility, responsiveness and reappraisal of long held assumptions, practices and approaches – an openness to the new, alongside the reassurance in troubled times that for so many their religion or belief provides. And in the face of adversity the pandemic has yielded many examples of strengthened community spirit across religion or belief divides.

The Commentary recalls the UN Secretary General's observation that there has been a "tsunami of hate and xenophobia". Religion and belief communities have been blamed for the virus; made scapegoat for the outbreaks; castigated as irresponsible 'super-spreaders'; accused of being resistant to implement public health measures, of peddling 'phoney' remedies, of opposing vaccinations – etc, etc. Whilst freedom of conscience must of course be respected, many of these attacks, which have made some religion or belief groups the target of conspiracy theories and of hate speech have amounted to little more than self-serving attempts to deflect attention from the failure of the authorities in relation to these matters.

But there have been other implications too, as fear fuels the flames of some of the traditional opponents of the freedom of religion or belief: the scapegoating of the 'outsider' and of the vulnerable, the poor and the marginalised. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that for many, the pandemic has provided a backdrop to a further deepening of the repression and suppression which they have been facing – as some states have taken the opportunities presented by the 'eyes of the international community being elsewhere' to return to their oppressive practices. As this Report makes clear, many marginalised communities – including minority religion or belief communities – have indeed faced intensified discrimination since the outbreak of the global pandemic, arguably even genocide.

This year in particular, in which the UN Special Rapporteur has placed a special focus on the impact of gender on the enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief, it is shocking to note the extent to which issues concerning gender discriminations have once again risen to the fore. The longstanding impacts of gender-based discrimination continue to be damningly negative, exacerbating the dehumanisation, inequalities and violations which were already being suffered. These have included, in the case of gender, the further limiting, or even the closing of, access to services within wider society, and being trapped in violent misogynistic and homophobic private settings, or with unequal burden of childcare and of the economic effects of the pandemic.

The response to the pandemic has shown us that it is not religion or belief communities which cling to the past: it is those who seek to negate the freedoms of religion or belief who do so. Whilst lamenting its continued need to do so, we commend the APPG for drawing attention to both the continued and the new themes that arise from shedding a light on the global situation of freedom of religion or belief in this Commentary. We recognise the challenge that upholding freedom of religion or belief poses, and the need for a rights-based response.

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# INTRODUCTION

Reliable, detailed, evidence-based monitoring and analysis of FoRB violations is essential for formulating, implementing and evaluating realistic policies and actions to address FoRB and interlinked human rights violations. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) FoRB Toolkit recognises that the primary action that Posts can take is to 'assess the situation regarding FoRB'.<sup>1</sup> This report has been provided, alongside other publicly available information, to support both Posts and country desks to assess actual and potential FoRB violations and to formulate, implement and evaluate appropriate responses.

Expertise in both FoRB and country contexts is necessary to accurately monitor and analyse FoRB violations. Expertise is also required to navigate some actors' minimisation or denial of FoRB violations. With limited resources, the FCDO can struggle to internally find the expertise essential for accurate assessments. The FCDO FoRB Toolkit requires internal assessments to use non-FCDO sources including 'the reports of civil society and other organisations,' which includes this APPG.<sup>2</sup> The APPG and its stakeholder organisations would strongly welcome a partnership in the accurate monitoring and analysis of FoRB violations that the Toolkit requires of posts. Such a partnership could enhance HMG and Parliament's knowledge about vulnerable groups who are at risk or who may require urgent assistance. It could also warn when these groups might be harmed by public comment on their situation.

In July 2020, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) published the 2019 Human Rights and Democracy Report. The report "provided an assessment of the global human rights situation, and set out the UK Government's thematic, consular, and programme work to advance human rights throughout the world. It focused on 30 countries where we are particularly concerned about human rights issues, and where we consider that the UK can make a real difference."<sup>3</sup>

These thirty Human Rights Priority Countries (HRPCs) are Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Libya, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

The report also indicates that for the UK government "Protecting the rights of people of all faiths or beliefs continues to be a top priority."<sup>4</sup> That is why the APPG, through its 20 stakeholder organisations, is once again providing 24 profiles of countries with significant FoRB violations. 17 countries marked as current FCDO HRPCs have been chosen for this report. These countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Central African Republic, China, North Korea, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Turkmenistan,

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<sup>1</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office FoRB Toolkit, Para 37, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/561516/Freedom\\_of\\_Religion\\_or\\_Belief\\_Toolkit\\_-\\_2016.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/561516/Freedom_of_Religion_or_Belief_Toolkit_-_2016.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Para 37 and Annex 3

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-priority-countries-autumn-2020-ministerial-statement/human-rights-priority-countries-ministerial-statement-january-to-june-2020#:~:text=The%2030%20Human%20Rights%20Priority,%2C%20Maldives%2C%20Myanmar%2C%20Pakistan%2C>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2019/human-rights-and-democracy-the-2019-foreign-and-commonwealth-office-report#preface-by-the-foreign-secretary-dominic-raab>

Uzbekistan, and Yemen. The APPG notes that the evidence strongly supports all these countries being designated as HRPCs. HRPC countries not included in this APPG report that also require special attention being given to FoRB are Eritrea, Libya, Maldives, Somalia and Syria.

There are also non-HRPC countries included in this report, as they have significant issues with FoRB: India, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nepal, Nigeria and Turkey.

The profiles included in this report complement the FCDO Human Rights and Democracy Reports but do not imply that serious FoRB violations do not take place elsewhere. The list of countries chosen is not exhaustive. The country profiles also highlight information and cases that have been brought to the attention of the authors at the time of writing and, again, are not exhaustive.

The report contains specific sections on the links between the COVID-19 pandemic and increased violations of FoRB, and on gender. We believe that acknowledging the interconnectedness of FoRB with other areas of vulnerability to the abuse of human rights is key to making progress, especially when the UK has taken a lead on gender, and in particular on sexual violence in conflict. This is an area in which the newly reorganised FCDO can demonstrate the benefits of the integration of the two departments.

In the spirit of partnership highlighted in the FCDO Toolkit, the APPG and its stakeholders provide this FoRB resource using accurate evidence-based monitoring and analysis of FoRB violations. We have been encouraged by signs of growth in that partnership over the past year, and very much hope that this report will help it to flourish further. In a world where evidence of violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief is very clearly increasing, this is a vital task.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **The APPG recommends:**

1. That the FCDO continues to affirm FoRB as a priority concern within its human rights agenda, and ensures that it is actively recognised as a key dimension of COVID-19 pandemic responses, and maintains its focus on gender and sexual violence in conflict.
2. That at a time of reorganisation, and serious budget cuts, the FCDO takes every care to maximise the potential opportunities of its reorganisation by mainstreaming FoRB considerations into its new processes at every level.
3. That FCDO staff thrust into new responsibilities, as a result of reorganisation, are encouraged to actively consider the FoRB dimension of their role.
4. That FCDO posts utilise the FCDO FoRB toolkit as a normal part of their work.
5. That the FCDO in London continues to encourage, support and monitor posts' implementation of the FCDO FoRB toolkit's recommendations.
6. That the work of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief is adequately resourced and fully integrated into the FCDO.

# COVID-19 IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: THE IMPACT ON FORB

The APPGs Written Submission to the International Development Select Committee inquiry on  
'Humanitarian crises monitoring – coronavirus in developing countries: secondary impacts.'  
(November 15, 2020)

## SECONDARY IMPACTS OF COVID-19 IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

### Scapegoating of religious and belief communities

1. In countries around the world, many marginalised communities have faced intensified discrimination since the outbreak of COVID-19. The UN Secretary General described this phenomenon as a “tsunami of xenophobia”.<sup>5</sup> Minority religious and belief communities are among those whose suffering has increased following the outbreak of COVID-19. Due to their already vulnerable status, many of these communities have been scapegoated and blamed for the virus. For example, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), “antisemitic hate speech has risen alarmingly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis.”<sup>6</sup> The UK Community Security Trust note that this hate speech “ranges from conspiracy theories about Jewish involvement in creating and spreading COVID-19... to simply wishing and hoping that Jewish people catch the virus and die from it.”<sup>7</sup> [Now antisemitic conspiracies are woven into anti-vaccination campaigns.<sup>8</sup>]

2. This scapegoating is partially a by-product of the human need to blame the other during difficult circumstances. However, it has also often been an opportunistic attempt to incite further hatred towards already marginalised communities and/or a tactical manoeuvre to distract from the failings of authorities to appropriately contain the virus. In India, for example, it has been all three. At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in India, two dozen Muslim missionaries tested positive for COVID-19 after an international event in Delhi. This led to accusations that Muslims were deliberately spreading the virus and a campaign of Islamophobia in which Muslims were labelled “bio-terrorists” and “corona-jihadists” and discriminated against. As a result, countless instances of violence against Muslims in India have been recorded. For example, one attack which was caught on video, shows a Muslim being beaten up with a bamboo stick by a man asking him about his conspiracy to spread the virus. Moreover, over 3,000 Muslims were forcibly detained by Government authorities for more than 40 days under the guise of protecting public health. The scapegoating of Muslims was picked up and supported by political leaders such as the BJP Minister for Minority Affairs who accused the event organisers of a “Talibani crime” and another BJP leader from Uttar Pradesh who advised citizens “do not buy from Muslims”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20076.doc.htm>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25800&LangID=E>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/antisemitism-online-attack-coronavirus-lockdown-cst-a9643876.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.adl.org/blog/racist-extremist-antisemitic-conspiracies-surround-coronavirus-vaccine-rollout> (not in original submission)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/indias-muslim-minority-experiences-increased-targeting-and-violence-during-COVID-19/>



3. India is not the only country which has experienced the political scapegoating of marginalised religious and belief communities. According to the Institute for Development Studies, “in a significant amount of the nations which have encountered outbreaks of the novel COVID-19, politicians and opinion leaders have openly condemned religious minority populations under the guise of epidemiological containment, through hateful messages on social media, public speeches and official policies.”<sup>10</sup> In South Korea, for example, members of the Shincheonji Church have been demonised and blamed for the spread of COVID-19 by many government officials, leading to over 4,000 documented cases of discrimination against its members including being fired from jobs due to membership of the church.<sup>11</sup>

4. The scapegoating of marginalised religious and belief communities has contributed to the many reports of individuals from these communities being attacked, denied aid or otherwise prevented from accessing life-saving humanitarian interventions. In Iraq, for example, there are many reports of Christian communities being the last to get necessary food and medical supplies.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in Pakistan, there have been reports of NGOs denying food and aid to Hindus and Christians or only serving them after Muslims have been served.<sup>13</sup> Some members of the ethnic and religious minority Hazara group in Pakistan have claimed that they need to disguise themselves if they hope to receive medical treatment or testing.<sup>14</sup> In Uganda, the government’s response to COVID-19 has systematically excluded religious minority groups. Consultative meetings with religious communities to allocate distribution of supplies and to coordinate responses and health messaging have been organised under the umbrella of the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda whose membership is limited to seven organisations. This means that all other groups are not included. This is not only to the detriment of those groups, but to everyone in Uganda, as certain groups being denied the knowledge and support to protect themselves from COVID-19 means that it is more likely to spread and persist in the country.<sup>15</sup> There are countless more examples of religious and belief minority communities globally being discriminated against following the outbreak of COVID-19.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Increased vulnerability of minority religious and belief communities due to economic pressures**

5. COVID-19 has exacerbated the economic pressures felt by already marginalised and often poor religious or belief communities. This has made life significantly more difficult for these communities. It has also made them much more vulnerable to threats and external pressure. For example, following the outbreak of COVID-19, many Hindus in Pakistan have been forced to convert to Islam in mass ceremonies in order to access jobs and opportunities, as well as to protect themselves from increasing stigmatisation.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, thousands of young Hindu, Shi’a, Sikh and Christian girls in Pakistan are kidnapped and converted to Islam every year. This happens generally with impunity because of the vulnerable status of these communities and, in particular, these girls, who suffer double discrimination because of their gender and belief.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/scapagoating-of-religious-minorities-during-COVID-19-is-history-repeating-itself/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/09/opinion/coronavirus-south-korea-church.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62332>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Coronavirus:-Karachi-NGO-denies-food-to-poor-Hindus-and-Christians-49699.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/go-in-disguise-to-ensure-you-receive-medical-treatment-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://africanarguments.org/2020/06/22/ugandas-COVID-19-neglect-of-minorities-is-bad-for-everyone/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/news/religious-inequalities-and-the-impact-of-COVID-19/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/04/world/asia/pakistan-hindu-conversion.html>

Women from these communities have become much more vulnerable since the outbreak of COVID-19 and this increased vulnerability puts them at much greater risk. As a result, many young girls from minority communities have been kidnapped and forcibly married in Pakistan in 2020<sup>18</sup> and incidents of domestic violence have increased dramatically, as they have done everywhere following the outbreak of COVID-19. This huge increase in domestic violence has led to several reports of women from minority communities, such as the Yazidis, taking their lives.<sup>19</sup>

### **State crackdowns on marginalised religious and belief communities**

6. Certain states have utilised the COVID-19 outbreak as an excuse to intensify persecution of marginalised religious or belief communities. For example, China has increased its interference and surveillance of Tibetan Buddhists under the pretence of attempting to tackle the COVID-19, even using contact tracing apps to monitor every movement of Tibetan citizens.<sup>20</sup> [This applies to all religious groups in China. Open Doors notes, “Encouraged by success in controlling Covid-19, local officials want to link health apps to incorporate social-credit points. As feared, social credits are already, in places, linked to religion.”<sup>21</sup>] Similarly, in Pakistan, 1500 Hazaras were forcibly detained in March by Government authorities upon their return from a pilgrimage to Iran, while non-Hazara travellers coming from other countries were allowed to travel freely, some without even basic health screening.<sup>22</sup> There are many other examples of governments using COVID-19 to crackdown on groups it wants to control. These are so prevalent that the International Religious Freedom Alliance (a group of 27 countries including the UK) published a declaration in which it specifically calls on governments to not use COVID-19 as a justification for human rights violations.<sup>23</sup>

### **Violent Conflict**

7. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, many countries have seen increases in levels of violent conflict.<sup>24</sup> This is because of how, in some cases, the pandemic has negatively interacted with the root causes of conflict such as youth unemployment, social and economic inequalities, and stigmatisation of minority groups. There has also been increasing reports of armed groups utilising the chaos and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, and the fact that state resources are being directed towards health interventions, to increase their activities. This increase in the rise of armed groups can have devastating consequences for countries as a whole, but it often creates a problem for religious or belief groups specifically. For example, according to the Institute for Development Studies, “with the security forces turning their attention to implementing lockdown measures, Daesh and others are re-emerging to attack minorities they previously had targeted, such as the Kakai’s.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/we-just-want-our-daughter-back-sanehas-parents-speak-out/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62470>

<sup>20</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/chinas-hidden-crackdown-in-tibet/>

<sup>21</sup> [https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?\\_ga=2.31839870.1354432029.1614347947-547195203.1610233542](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?_ga=2.31839870.1354432029.1614347947-547195203.1610233542) [not included in original submission]

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m2280>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.government.nl/documents/diplomatic-statements/2020/08/20/COVID-19-and-religious-minorities-pandemic-statement>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.degruyter.com/view/journals/peps/ahead-of-print/article-10.1515-peps-2020-0050/article-10.1515-peps-2020-0050.xml>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/COVID-19-and-increased-daesh-attacks-threaten-survival-of-iraqs-religious-minorities/>

The UN has also noted that in response to the virus Daesh “is continuing its efforts to reassert itself in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in Nigeria, according to the US Institute for Peace, “Boko Haram has stepped up its attacks as the number of cases in Borno state grows. These attacks combined with other battles involving farmers and herders and increasing banditry in the northwest have displaced hundreds of thousands of people... The lockdown measures are increasing the demand for food in IDP camps, and the conditions in these camps make it challenging, if not impossible, for people to protect themselves from the virus.”<sup>27</sup> These attacks have devastated Christian communities in Nigeria. Furthermore, the insecurity caused by the pandemic makes any health response much more difficult, thereby making the spread of the virus more likely.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-07-06/secretary-generals-remarks-the-opening-of-the-virtual-counter-terrorism-week-united-nations-delivered>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.usip.org/blog/2020/05/COVID-19-and-conflict-nigeria>

## GENDER AND FORB

*The APPG wishes to acknowledge with thanks the contributions and advice of the director and staff of Gender and Religious Freedom, an international NGO working at the intersection of gender equality and freedom of religion or belief.*<sup>28</sup>

Stakeholders of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief have reported concerns at the intersection between freedom of religion or belief and gender in several countries. This section offers a precis of some of the key issues of concern and several salient examples.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had catastrophic consequences for vulnerable populations around the globe. At the intersection of gender and FoRB is a compounding of vulnerabilities which in ‘normal’ times is systematically exploited by antagonists of FoRB.<sup>29</sup> This produces a global pattern of abuse including ‘forced marriage’ and ‘sexual assault’ as the two most common tactics used against Christian women in 50 countries.<sup>30</sup> COVID-19 restrictions have further exacerbated these complex vulnerabilities whilst simultaneously increasing impunity for aggressors. Governments, civil society actors and fragile national infrastructures struggle to deliver a COVID-19 response resulting in greater impunity for perpetrators of gender-specific religious persecution.

Gender-based violence targeting minorities merely blends in with the increased domestic violence or honour killings. Many of these abuses and violations are hidden and under-reported or, at worst, known and yet dismissed in pandemic times. A senior leader in **India** has stated they have lost significant ground in protecting religious minority women against gender-based violence (GBV) as there has been a significant increase in targeted trafficking of vulnerable communities facing economic hardship and lack of food security due to lockdowns.

A report published last year by The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) stated, “The evidence gathered suggests that across contexts and religions, there is a pattern of girls and women being targeted for sexual grooming, not only out of sexual predation, but a wider political project to hurt the religious minority and create a religiously homogenous society.”<sup>31</sup>

### Country content:

In **India**, Dalit women experience double marginalisation due to their gender and caste. In October 2020, the BBC reported on a Dalit woman who was gang-raped in Uttar Pradesh.<sup>32</sup> The situation in India is a microcosm representative of other regions. FoRB violations here have been exacerbated during COVID-19. Furthermore, evidence suggests that government restrictions and violence are gender specific.

In **Nepal**, some women and girls convert to Christianity. However, it is dangerous for them to reveal their faith, so they quietly or secretly take part in church services. When known, they are discriminated against by their peers, socially ostracized and severely beaten by family members. Immediate family of ‘convert’ Christians may lock them up. After isolation, they are often deprived of basic survival needs, educational support,

<sup>28</sup>: <https://www.genderandreligiousfreedom.org/>

<sup>29</sup> For further details on intersectionality of gender and FoRB see:

[https://www.iirf.eu/site/assets/files/116862/vol9\\_2016.pdf](https://www.iirf.eu/site/assets/files/116862/vol9_2016.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GSPR-2020.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/download.php?file=wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CREID-Briefing-Note-Ideologically-Motivated-Sexual-Grooming-MT-August-2020.pdf#ReligiousMinorities>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-54418513> - Hathras Case: Dalit Women are among the most oppressed in the world, 6 October 2020, BBC

parental possessions and basic legal rights. Physical violence comes gradually after emotional and mental torture.<sup>33</sup>

In some rural areas, Christians are socially boycotted and are not allowed to use community resources. In one instance, the Buddhists living in a post-earthquake IDP camp did not allow Christians to share water from the same supply system, and two separate supplies had to be installed. As it is women who use community resources more often than men, this denial of resources affects them more.<sup>34</sup>

In **Malaysia**, legal rights of women and girls are undermined by provisions that make exceptions for *sharia*. Civil society organizations stated in a Feb 2018 CEDAW report "Muslim women now enjoy far less rights in marriage, divorce, guardianship of their children and inheritance than their non-Muslim counterparts." It also stated: "Other areas of gross discrimination against women under the Islamic Family Laws include divorce, polygamy and child marriage."<sup>35</sup>

These laws open avenues of vulnerability for female converts from Islam to Christianity, the most prevalent being the threat of rape and/or forced marriage to a Muslim. The minimum legal age for marriage in the Islamic family laws (16 for female) can be lowered with the consent of a *sharia* judge. This law increases the vulnerability of girls who convert to Christianity. The federal government tried to act against child marriages but encountered the bitter resistance of conservative Muslim federal states. In some cases, young Christian women are abducted, never to be heard of again. This is an effective tactic because once they are 'registered' as Muslims there is no mechanism for reversing this, even in the event of divorce. Additionally, all children born because of the so-called "marriage" are also legally considered Muslim. A small number of converts are thought to have fled or gone into hiding to avoid this kind of religiously motivated family retribution.

In **Iraq**, some 2,800 Yazidi women are still missing and both Yazidis and Christians are subject to regular violence and often blamed for the spread of COVID-19.

Concerns were raised by minority faith groups in August 2019 that proposals to include four Islamic clerics among the Federal Supreme Court's 13 members could mean that *sharia* would always take precedence. Opponents claimed it would end attempts to overturn legislation such as that which prevents Christian men from marrying Muslim women without converting to Islam.

Iraqi women are guaranteed equal rights in the Iraqi Provisional Constitution, ensuring their right to vote, run for political office, own property, and for girls to attend school.<sup>36</sup> However, there are still existing provisions that discriminate against women in the Iraqi Constitution, the Personal Status Law, and the Penal Code. There has not been significant progress in this since the launch of the Iraqi National Action Plan (INAP) for Women, Peace and Security (WPS) to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (1325) on Women, Peace and Security in 2014. While this was a promise of enabling women's participation and protection in the processes of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Iraq<sup>37</sup> there has been little progress in a country experiencing continued economic instability, popular protests, and security problems. While the

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/nepal-4-women-arrested-for-attempting-to-forcefully-convert-people-to-christianity/> Four Women Arrested for "Attempting to Forcefully Convert People to Christianity, 8 November 2018, World Watch Monitor

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2019/05/01/press/4321/article.htm> - Christians Accused of Proselytism Released Without Bail, 1 May 2019, Christian Solidarity Worldwide

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22673&LangID=E> – see CEDAW report, 19 February, 2018, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/wrd/iraq-women.htm>

<sup>37</sup> (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67347/1/WPSIraq.pdf>)

constitution requires 25 per cent of MPs to be women, they remain side-lined from making a positive contribution to peace and security initiatives and reconciliation efforts.

The reality for Iraqi women is that the impact of war and sectarian conflict has left many as widows, who can quickly fall victim to poverty.

The impact of freedom of religion and belief violations has further disempowered women from religious minorities. The Daesh conflict, early marriage, exclusion from school, domestic violence, and lack of knowledge of their social and legal rights means that their interests are unrepresented, particularly in the Nineveh Plains area of northern Iraq, which lacks a security framework and federal government commitment to lasting change. Representation continues to be made for a concerted effort to empower Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities, particularly women, through local civic representatives.<sup>38</sup> For Iraqi women from religious minorities, it is also virtually impossible for them to secure jobs in the public sector or even in the private sector outside their own communities as they do not have full citizenship rights. The combination of a lack of legal rights, opportunities for employment, violence from within their own communities and the threat of violence from militia groups, and now the COVID-19 pandemic, means that some minorities may leave Iraq permanently,<sup>39</sup> pushing Iraq into further economic destabilisation and its religious minorities into extinction.<sup>40</sup> Women are particularly vulnerable within these destabilising circumstances.

A report by Open Doors USA makes the point that there are gendered differences in how men and women in religious minority communities face pressures at the intersection of gender and religious identity.<sup>41</sup> It observes that men in religious minorities face greater risk of physical violence, economic harassment and incarceration, women face greater risk of sexual violence, forced marriage and forced divorce.<sup>42</sup>

In **Pakistan**, the Hazara Shia community had to face the consequences of the provincial government's mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis, as the community was blamed<sup>43</sup> for the spread of the virus. Hazara women in particular bore the brunt. Most of the Hazara women who were forced to quarantine had to spend 44<sup>44</sup> days in the quarantine camp in Quetta, Balochistan. The quarantine camps had sub-standard facilities<sup>45</sup> such as a lack of washrooms and water. Hazara women even had to face difficulties due to the racial profiling<sup>46</sup> of the community in the post-quarantine scenario. According to one report, some local doctors in Quetta refused<sup>47</sup> to treat Hazara women fearing that they will spread the virus. Similarly, women from Hindu Christian faiths in Pakistan continued to face persecution such as forced conversions and forced marriages during 2020 (details in the Pakistan country section).

<sup>38</sup> [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/4c21093d-a241-416d-997a-3cc8ad3a4576>

<sup>40</sup> <https://english.alarabiya.net/views/news/middle-east/2020/04/20/Iraq-and-its-minorities-face-a-new-challenge>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GSPR-2020.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, see pp 7-8

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/pakistans-hazara-shia-minority-blamed-for-spread-of-COVID-19/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/dire-conditions-for-hazara-shia-pilgrims-during-COVID-19-quarantine-in-pakistan-six-women-share-their-experiences/>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/pakistan-coronavirus-camp-no-facilities-no-humanity>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/pakistans-hazara-shia-minority-blamed-for-spread-of-COVID-19/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/go-in-disguise-to-ensure-you-receive-medical-treatment-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>

In **Colombia**, women deciding to become an active Christian can face domestic abuse and sexual abuse. A former guerrilla combatant was sexually abused by her comrades when she left the group after she converted to Christianity. Another young woman grew up as a Christian, but abandoned her faith when she met her future husband. She later returned to her faith, whereupon her husband, a judge, began to abuse her, and threatening to end the marriage and to take the children away. For a time she practiced her faith secretly, but when her husband tried to force her to sign a document saying she would never take her children to church, she refused. She lost custody of the children and was forced to give him compensation.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/COLOMBIA-Compound-structural-vulnerabilities-facing-Christian-women-2018-FINAL-WITH-PREFACE.pdf>

# AFGHANISTAN

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population 36 million. Estimated 80 per cent Sunni Muslim, 10-19 per cent Shi'a (Imami and Ismaili) Muslims, of whom 90 per cent are ethnic Hazaras. Hindus, Sikhs, Bahá'ís, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians and others comprise around 0.3 per cent.<sup>49</sup>

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The state religion is Islam – the Hanafi Sunni School of thought, which is backed by the Taliban. The constitution protects the freedom of religious minorities: Article 2 states 'followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law'. However, blasphemy and apostasy laws significantly undermine freedom of religion or belief for people of other faiths and none.<sup>50</sup>

Decades of war, foreign intervention and political instability, have made Afghanistan an extremely dangerous country for its religious minorities. The US/Taliban 29 February 2020 peace deal means that religious minorities fear more persecution as the Taliban gain greater control. Rather than less violence, the country has been hit by a new wave of militant attacks by both Taliban and ISKP (Islamic State of Khorasan Province), a group affiliated with Daesh.

The Shi'a Hazara community, who experienced persecution under previous Taliban rule now fear more attacks and discrimination:<sup>51</sup> both IS and Taliban consider them infidels. In 2020 they faced multiple deadly attacks:

- 6 March - a large gathering of Shi'a Hazaras were targeted in the Mazari Square area while they were commemorating their religious leader.<sup>52</sup>
- 12 May - around 24 people including infants, mothers and nurses were killed in a horrific attack in a maternity hospital in a Shi'a majority area<sup>53</sup>
- 24 October - more than 40 students were killed in an attack against Shi'a students at an education centre in Kabul<sup>54</sup>
- 2 November - around 22 students were killed and over 22 were wounded after a brutal attack in Kabul University.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/afghanistan/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020-08/Afghanistan.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> <https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/this-is-the-shi-a-sect-that-has-faced-endless-persecution-in-pakistan-afghanistan/225412/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://unama.unmissions.org/united-nations-condemns-attack-targeting-civilians-kabul-commemoration-event>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/afghanistan-maternity-hospital-attack-united-states-islamic-state-1.5571026#:~:text=A%20U.S.%20official%20said%20Friday%20the%20Islamic%20State,killing%2024%20people%2C%20including%20newborn%20babies%20and%20mothers.>

<sup>54</sup> <https://satp.org/terrorist-activity/afghanistan-Oct-2020>

<sup>55</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/kabul-university-attack-hostages-afghan/2020/11/02/ca0f1b6a-1ce7-11eb-ad53-4c1fda49907d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/kabul-university-attack-hostages-afghan/2020/11/02/ca0f1b6a-1ce7-11eb-ad53-4c1fda49907d_story.html)



The indigenous communities of Hindus and Sikhs are on the verge of disappearing as they face continuing discrimination and persecution both by the extremist militants and the state and are forced to leave the country.<sup>56</sup> They often experience interference by local authorities in following their religious rituals like cremation. Illegal appropriation of Sikh owned property is another form of state-sanctioned discrimination.<sup>57</sup>

In the 25 March attack in a centuries old Sikh temple over 25 Sikh worshippers lost their lives, including a 4-year-old.<sup>58</sup> This was followed by another bomb attack while the families of those killed were mourning in the temple.

Christians are forced by societal and family pressure to remain secret.<sup>59</sup> The Bahá'í community is also forced to live in secret since 2007 after a fatwa was issued against them declaring their faith blasphemous.<sup>60</sup>

In February 2020 Amnesty International's Zaman Sultani recognised significant progress in human rights in Afghanistan that needed to be protected and built on.<sup>61</sup> The Afghan government has taken steps to provide greater security for the minority communities; but their lack of control over much territory, the instability and corruption, means that minorities continue to suffer.

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/afghanistan/>

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<sup>56</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/sikhs-hindus-endangered-minorities-in-afghanistan-says-resolution-introduced-in-us-congress/articleshow/77607022.cms>

<sup>57</sup> <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/sikhs-in-afghanistan-a-neglected-vanishing-minority/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/afghanistan-dozens-killed-in-attack-on-kabul-sikh-temple>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/afghanistan/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2020-08/Afghanistan.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/afghanistan-peace-must-include-human-rights/>

# BANGLADESH

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population 161 million. 90 per cent are Sunni Muslim, 9.5 per cent Hindu. Most of the remainder are Christians; Buddhists, Shi'a Muslims,<sup>62</sup> Ahmadi Muslims, animists, agnostics and atheists are a very small proportion of the population.<sup>63</sup>

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The constitution is secular, but states 'The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religions.' In practice religious minorities and the non-religious face structural and societal discrimination.

The broader environment in Bangladesh is authoritative and regressive inclining towards religious nationalism. The lack of democratic values and a brutal crackdown against secular and atheist bloggers and dissidents has created a culture of impunity that not only limits freedom of religion or belief but also places religious minorities under a constant threat of violence and discrimination.

Oppressive laws, like the Digital Security Act (DSA) that criminalises blasphemy as a non-bailable offence, continue to harass and threaten religious minority groups and the non-religious, paving the way for extremist elements to target and attack them.<sup>64</sup> Incidents of mob lynching have increased. There are reports that suggest that the authorities are either sympathetic to the vigilantes or lack the competence to deal with them.

In July 2020, police indicated that seeking to arrest human rights activist and secular blogger Asaduzzaman Noor, also known as Asad Noor, after new criminal charges were brought against him under the Digital Security Act on July 14 for 'spreading rumours' and 'defaming Islam' via a Facebook video.<sup>65</sup>

On 1 November 2020, 10 houses of Hindus and a government office were burned and destroyed by an extremist Muslim mob over an allegation of hurting the 'religious sentiments' of Muslims through a Facebook post supporting recent French cartoons. However, the police arrested two Hindus under the DSA while no action has been taken against the perpetrators.<sup>66</sup>

In January 2020, a Sufi singer Shairiat Sarker was arrested under the DSA over charges of hurting 'religious sentiments' of Muslims as he uploaded comments on YouTube stating how religion was being used as a political tool.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-1-religious-affiliation/#identity>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/how-free-are-we-1988297>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/bangladesh-authorities-must-not-harass-family-of-hrds-in-exile/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/hindu-homes-attacked-in-bangladesh-over-rumours-about-alleged-facebook-post-slandering-islam-164880>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/1/13/bangladesh-arrests-sufi-singer-under-internet-law-after-protests>

On 7 November, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council organised protests about violence against religious minorities, stating that 17 people had been killed in the previous seven months.<sup>68</sup>

On 27 January around 25 Rohingya Christians were attacked in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar;<sup>69</sup> Rohingya Christians are more vulnerable due to their religion and ethnicity.

1.5 million Hindu families have been negatively impacted by the outworking of the Vested Property Law.<sup>70</sup> There are also continued reports of land grabs within religious minority communities, including seizure of their houses of worship. Such actions are often preceded by physical assaults on families to drive them off their land and reportedly occur with the complicity or direct involvement of local government officials. Central government has taken steps to attempt to combat this.<sup>71</sup>

In recent years, dissidents and activists have face enforced disappearances that has created a threat to atheists, and secular bloggers in particular, but also religious minorities in general.<sup>72</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/bangladesh/>

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<sup>68</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2020/11/03/protests-over-attacks-on-minorities-on-november-7>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/13/christians-abducted-attacked-bangladesh-refugee-camp>

<sup>70</sup> [https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020 Bangladesh Country Update.pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Bangladesh%20Country%20Update.pdf)

<sup>71</sup> [https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020 Bangladesh Country Update.pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Bangladesh%20Country%20Update.pdf)

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/rising-attacks-on-freedom-of-expression-and-peaceful-assembly-in-bangladesh-must-be-stopped/>

# BURMA

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Of a total population of 56 million approximately 88 per cent are Theravada Buddhists, 6 per cent are Christians and 4 per cent Muslims. The overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim Rohingya population was estimated at 1.1 million prior to the outbreak of violence and initial exodus of Rohingya into Bangladesh in October 2016. There is significant demographic correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Bamar ethnic group and among the Shan, Rakhine, Mon, and numerous other ethnic groups. Various forms of Christianity are dominant among the Kachin, Chin, and Naga ethnic groups. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist and some Karen are Muslim.<sup>73</sup>

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Burma has a long history of FoRB violations stemming from the rule of the military junta which controlled the country for over 50 years from 1962. The government in 2020 continued to contribute to religious intolerance, discriminating against religious and ethnic minorities. There was a determination to preserve and protect a Buddhist identity. The military, and its affiliated political party, fuelled a movement of Burmese Buddhist nationalism. The rise of ultra-Buddhist religious nationalism led to anti-Muslim violence and discrimination throughout the country, and the genocide of the Rohingyas. Christians also continued to face restrictions, discrimination and occasional violence as a result of Buddhist nationalism in society, as well as targeted attacks by the military in the ethnic conflict regions.<sup>74</sup>

The Rohingya are not regarded as Burmese citizens. Since 2017 the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar has documented instances of Burmese military units involved in indiscriminate killings of civilians, mass rape, disappearances, arbitrary arrests, looting, and property destruction. Both government authorities and non-state actors also shuttered and destroyed mosques; prevented Rohingya from worshipping; desecrated Qur'ans; and targeted imams for detention, torture, and killings. Well over a million Rohingya were forced out of their homes in Rakhine State due to the brutal and horrific violence perpetrated by the Burmese military; more than 742,000 Rohingya sought refuge in Bangladesh, while 120,000 are internally displaced in camps within Rakhine State.<sup>75</sup> The International Court of Justice (ICJ) order on January 23, 2020, directed Burma to prevent all genocidal acts against Rohingya Muslims; it adopted "provisional measures" that require it to prevent genocide and take steps to preserve evidence.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/burma/>

<sup>74</sup> <https://forbinfull.org/2021/02/17/we-are-not-safe-anymore-burmas-coup-shatters-hopes-for-democracy-religious-tolerance-and-human-rights/>

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Legislation%20Factsheet%20-%20Rohingya%20Refugee%5B5481%5D.pdf>

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/23/world-court-rules-against-myanmar-rohingya>

Not every Rohingya is a Muslim. Those who are Christians face a double vulnerability – persecuted for their ethnicity and their faith. Last year a group of Rohingya Christians in a UNHCR transit camp in Bangladesh were attacked by a violent mob. They destroyed their homes and their house-church building, and looted their belongings, leaving them with only the clothes they were wearing that day. Some of the Christians were so badly beaten they had to be hospitalised.<sup>77</sup>

Burma's Religious Conversion Law, part of the "Law for Protection of Race and Religion" requires citizens who wish to change their religion to obtain approval from a newly established Registration Board for religious conversion, set up in all townships.

The predominantly Christian Kachin and Shan states have been plagued by years of fighting between ethnic armed groups and the army. Insurgency groups have been known to close churches and detain civilians, including pastors and bible school students.

The 1 February 2021 coup, which has seen the military seize power once again, sets hope for human rights and FoRB back much further. The military has a long history of weaponizing religion and repressing the rights of religious minorities.<sup>78</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/burma/>

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<sup>77</sup> [https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?\\_ga=2.68859921.1475676765.1613559336-547195203.1610233542](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?_ga=2.68859921.1475676765.1613559336-547195203.1610233542)

<sup>78</sup> <https://forbinfull.org/2021/02/17/we-are-not-safe-anymore-burmas-coup-shatters-hopes-for-democracy-religious-tolerance-and-human-rights/>

# CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (CAR)

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population 6 million. It is estimated that 89 per cent are Christian, 9 per cent (Sunni) Muslim.<sup>79</sup>

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Many Christians and Muslims follow a number of traditional cultural practices, which some commentators have seen as syncretic.<sup>80</sup> One of the groups most vulnerable in relation to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) violations are those who have exercised the right to change their belief.<sup>81</sup> This is due to the intense and ongoing violence that exists along ethno-religious lines.<sup>82</sup>

Conflict since 2013 has left most of the country occupied by armed militia groups responsible for a range of human rights abuses.<sup>83</sup> The Séléka (a majority Muslim coalition, but which also included fighters from Christianity and other religious groups) overthrew Christian President Francois Bozize, replacing him with Michael Djotodia, the country's first Muslim leader.<sup>84</sup> He formally disbanded Séléka after he took power, but members of Séléka have continued to operate in the country, taking control of territory and establishing themselves as the de facto authority in these areas. These militia groups are either referred to as Séléka or else as ex-Séléka. In opposition, and in response to intense bouts of violence, both during and after the coup, anti-Balaka groups began to form, as armed actors coalesced.<sup>85</sup> Predominantly, anti-Balaka groups have consisted of pre-existing village defence groups, but they have also attracted former soldiers who remain loyal to deposed President Bozize, former Séléka fighters, disaffected youths seeking revenge for Séléka violations, and criminals.<sup>86</sup>

As disinformation and fake news drive hate speech, Christians and Muslims have come to view one another with prejudice and animosity. Grievances span from disputes over political power and economic opportunity to social discrimination and lack of land rights.<sup>87</sup> Throughout these intercommunal conflicts, hate speech has been an instrumental tool in fostering resentment and hostility. Easily accessible through news sources, radio, and social media, it is a particularly dynamic mechanism that has continued to destabilize the population and prevent reconciliation.

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<sup>79</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/central-african-republic/>

<sup>80</sup> [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)  
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CAR-WWL-2021-Country-dossier.pdf>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/africa/2018/02/violence-divides-car-christian-muslim-lines-180228162354756.html>

<sup>83</sup> <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CAR-WWL-2021-Country-dossier.pdf>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/03/anxiety-high-as-rebels-take-over-central-african-republic/>

<sup>85</sup> [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/05/report/3901/article.htm>

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Conflict-scan2-ENG-09212017.pdf>

While not essentially a religious struggle, it can assume a sectarian dimension. In areas held by Séléka fighters in the north of CAR, religious leaders who have publicly denounced the violence have been threatened and church buildings have been burned and ransacked. The conflict has resulted in the displacement of thousands of Christians who have been forced to live in camps and lose their homes and livelihood. In November 2018 there was significant violence.<sup>88</sup> In the anti-Balaka-held regions in the south-west of the country it is Muslims who face more restrictions. As a result, very few Muslims remain in the area.<sup>89</sup>

In response to the escalating violence a new peace deal was agreed between the Touadéra government and the 14 armed group leaders in February 2019 – the eighth agreement in two years.<sup>90</sup> Violence resurfaced in May and June of 2019 – with the UN indicating that between 50 and 70 violations of the peace accord were reported every week.<sup>91</sup> While the Khartoum Agreement represented a step towards formal reconciliation, justice and accountability, its implementation has stalled and many communities continue to experience the same security risks fuelled by religious discrimination that have existed for the past eight years.<sup>92</sup>

The peace deal collapsed and violence returned around the general election in December 2020. There are now an estimated 1.2 million displaced persons,<sup>93</sup> with a possible further 200,000 following the election violence.<sup>94</sup> The absence of a formal justice and reconciliation process throughout CAR has allowed the ideological components of the conflict to continue influencing the fighting. Although the violence sparked by the December 2020 election, as well as CAR's overall instability, is not necessarily religious in nature, the lack of formal justice and reconciliation makes it entirely possible that violence could become increasingly defined along religious and ideological lines.

APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/central-african-republic/>

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<sup>88</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/05/report/3901/article.htm>

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.fides.org/en/news/65568>

<sup>91</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1040961>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/10/central-african-republic-struggles-implement-peace-deal>

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/central-african-republic#>

<sup>94</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1081682>

# CHINA

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Of China's estimated 1.4 billion people, approximately 18 per cent are Buddhist, including Tibetan Buddhists, 5 per cent Christian and 2 per cent are Muslim.<sup>95</sup>

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China is officially an atheist state. Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution protects all 'normal' religious activities within the five officially recognised religions of Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism.<sup>96</sup> In order to secure official legal status, these religious groups must register with state-sanctioned 'patriotic' associations such as the 'Three Self Patriotic Movement' or the 'Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association'.<sup>97</sup> These associations experience high levels of state control. Many religious groups have remained unregistered with the state.

Freedom of religion or belief is a mixed picture in China depending on place, religion, ethnicity etc. However, across the country, it is in rapid decline. In the most extreme instances, religious adherents are arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed.

Tibetan Buddhism and Islam face particularly harsh restrictions since their activities are widely seen as political, as both regions have been or are still home to independence movements, some of them acting violently against the authorities.

It is estimated that between 900,000 and 1.8 million Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims have been detained in more than 1,300 concentration camps in Xinjiang,<sup>98</sup> something the Chinese government are trying their best to mask.<sup>99</sup> Individuals have been sent to camps for wearing long beards, refusing alcohol, or other behaviours authorities deem to be signs of "religious extremism." Some suffer torture, rape, sterilization, and other abuses. Nearly half a million Muslim children have been separated from their families and placed in boarding schools. During 2019 the camps increasingly transitioned from re-education to forced labour as detainees were forced to work in cotton and textile factories.

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<sup>95</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/china/#people-and-society>

<sup>96</sup> People's Republic of China: Stakeholder submission to the Universal Periodic Review, 31st session submitted by CSW, CSW, April 2018, p.1, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/06/report/3902/article.htm>

<sup>97</sup> Religious Freedom Report: China, Aid to the Church in Need, June 2018, <https://religious-freedom-report.org/report/?report=177>

<sup>98</sup> USCIRF, 2020 Annual Report and Recommendations for World's Most Egregious Violators of Religious Freedom, 29 April 2020, p.20, [https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>99</sup> Kumar, Akshaya., Chinese diplomats try using UN shield Xinjiang crimes, Human Rights Watch, 1 November 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/01/chinese-diplomats-try-using-un-shield-xinjiang-crimes>



There are otherwise specific examples of a downward trend such as the demolition of mosques (thousands of mosques in Xinjiang have been damaged or destroyed in the past three years),<sup>100</sup> temples and churches by authorities, and the removal of religious symbols and pictures from homes and places of worship.

There have also been less visible signs of FoRB decline, nonetheless significant. For example, clergy removed and replaced by government approved appointments; pressure on schools to monitor religious beliefs of students and staff; the rise of state surveillance and artificial intelligence cameras outside places of worship.<sup>101</sup>

The violation of FoRB sits within the broader notion of increasing human rights abuses under Xi Jinping where state control, enforced legislation under the banner of national security, and a heightened sensitivity to perceived challenges to Party rule have all occurred hand in hand.

There has been a new focus on religion at the highest levels of government, a revision of the Regulations on Religious Affairs, and fresh emphasis put on the requirement that all religious communities in China ‘sinicise’ by becoming ‘Chinese in orientation’ and adapting to ‘socialist society’. It is thought that the intent behind ‘sinicisation’ is to eradicate independent religion and bring all religious activities under state control. The Party's top priority is “to maintain stability” and religion, including Christianity, is seen as destabilizing the system.

The Communist Party extended its regulation of all religions in 2020, and even government-approved churches, both Catholic and Protestant, are under ever-more surveillance, both online and offline. Thousands of churches have been closed and dozens of pastors arrested.<sup>102</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/china/>

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<sup>100</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/25/thousands-of-xinjiang-mosques-destroyed-damaged-china-report-finds>

<sup>101</sup> World Watch Monitor, Risk of persecution going digital with rise of surveillance state, 15 January 2020, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2020/01/risk-of-persecution-going-digital-with-rise-of-surveillance-state/>

<sup>102</sup> [https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?\\_ga=2.14172471.1449146661.1611142015-547195203.1610233542](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?_ga=2.14172471.1449146661.1611142015-547195203.1610233542)

# EGYPT

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

From a population of 102 million approximately 90 per cent of the population is Sunni Muslim and approximately 10 per cent is Christian (estimates range from 5 to 15 per cent). An estimated 90 per cent of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church.<sup>103</sup>

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According to USCIRF “Religious freedom conditions in Egypt are trending tentatively in a positive direction... However, systematic and ongoing religious inequalities remain affixed in the Egyptian state and society, and various forms of religious bigotry and discrimination continue to plague the country’s Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.”<sup>104</sup>

While the constitution declares that “freedom of belief is absolute”, it only allows this freedom for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. There are severe penalties for declaring oneself to be an atheist, including up to five years’ imprisonment, and a new law is being drawn up to criminalise atheism. It is illegal to register an explicitly humanist, atheist, secularist, or other non-religious NGO and those that attempt it face harassment from the authorities.<sup>105</sup>

One of the most visible signs of discrimination against atheists, apostates from Islam and members of minority religions is the policy concerning the Egyptian State ID cards, which include a section on religion where only one of the three “divine religions” can be recognised. It is in practice almost impossible to change the designation from ‘Muslim’ on the ID card.<sup>106</sup>

Concerning atheists and agnostics, they are “one of Egypt’s least-protected minorities”, according to Human Rights Watch, and there has been a prolonged campaign to turn “youth” away from atheism, with several prominent atheists arrested and convicted. In June 2020, activist and blogger Anas Hassan, was convicted and sentenced on appeal to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 300,000 EGP (approximately \$ 19,144) for managing the Facebook page ‘The Egyptian atheists’ which allegedly criticized the “divinely revealed religions”.<sup>107</sup>

Also in June two young men were sentenced to a year in jail for promoting the Shi’a doctrine of Islam.

Restrictions on church building remain largely in place. Four years after the issuance of Law 80 of 2016 on the construction of churches, the government has only conditionally legalized 1,638 churches that were operating without official permits, roughly 25 per cent of church buildings that applied for legal status.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/EGYPT/>

<sup>104</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/countries/egypt>

<sup>105</sup> <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-northern-africa/egypt/>

<sup>106</sup> [https://bahaipedia.org/Egyptian\\_identification\\_card\\_controversy](https://bahaipedia.org/Egyptian_identification_card_controversy)

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/egypt#5419da>

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/egypt#5419da>

Persecution against Christians happens mostly at the community level, especially in Upper Egypt where Salafist movements exert a strong influence on the rural communities due to high levels of illiteracy and poverty. Incidents include false accusations, community ostracism, mob violence, and the abduction of Christian women (causing many to feel unsafe leaving the house alone). Although Egypt's government speaks positively about Egypt's Christian community, the lack of serious law enforcement and the unwillingness of local authorities to protect Christians leave them vulnerable to all kinds of attacks, communal hostility and mob violence.<sup>109</sup> For example, an Egyptian court acquitted three men who led a Muslim mob to strip, beat, spit on and humiliate a Christian grandmother whose son was falsely accused of having a romantic relationship with a Muslim woman.<sup>110</sup>

There is particular concern for Ramy Kamel, experiencing rapidly declining health amid the threat of the spread of COVID-19 in Egypt's prisons. Egyptian State Security arrested Mr. Kamel, a founder of the Maspero Youth Union, on November 23, 2019, one day before he was expected to travel to Geneva, Switzerland to testify at the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues. He has remained in perpetual pre-trial detention since that time, ostensibly under Case no. 1475 of 2019, and yet prosecutors have failed to arrange a trial date, release detailed charges, or provide documented evidence as required by law. Mr. Kamel has spent much of that time in solitary confinement, with limited access to legal counsel and no access to healthcare despite suffering from acute asthma—which his family found during a rare visit has worsened considerably.<sup>111</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/egypt/>

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<sup>109</sup> <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/egypt/>

<sup>110</sup> <https://www.christianpost.com/news/egyptian-court-acquits-muslim-men-who-stripped-beat-christian.html>

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/release-statements/uscirf-calls-release-ramy-kamel>

# INDIA

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

India's 1.3 billion population is around 80 per cent Hindu, 14 per cent Muslim, 2.3 per cent Christian, 1.7 per cent Sikh, 0.7 per cent Jain and smaller groups of Zoroastrians, Jewish and Bahá'ís.<sup>112</sup>

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The constitution of India is secular and guarantees protection to its religious minorities. However, in practice things have worsened drastically under the Hindu Nationalist (Hindutva) Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi as the prime minister since 2014. BJP is the political wing of a militant Hindu extremist organisation RSS. Under BJP rule, India has become a country where Muslims, Christians, and other minorities are at greater risk.

Many fear that the controversial and discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which granted Indian citizenship to selected minorities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh will be used in conjunction with the National Register of Citizens (NRC)<sup>113</sup> to deem minorities as "illegal immigrants".<sup>114</sup> The CAA provoked countrywide protests, often met with violent repression by the authorities.

February 2020 saw significant anti-Muslim violence in Delhi that left 24 people dead and 189 injured. Mosques and shops were torched, people dragged out of their homes, lynched, and burnt alive. Many families were forced to leave due to the fear of more violence. The police were alleged to have incited and helped the violence.<sup>115</sup>

There has also been a rise in incidents of violence against Christians. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), 327 cases of persecution were documented in 2020. At least five Christians were murdered and six churches were burnt or demolished in religiously motivated attacks. In addition, EFI noted 26 incidents of social boycotts where Christian communities were shunned by their non-Christian neighbours due to their religious identity.<sup>116</sup> Many Christians have been detained without trial.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/>

<sup>113</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/controversy-around-a-new-citizenship-register-in-assam-festers/>

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/what-is-nrc-all-you-need-to-know-about-national-register-of-citizens-1629195-2019-12-18>

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-53891354>

<sup>116</sup> <https://www.persecution.org/2021/01/18/christian-group-india-documents-327-incidents-persecution-2020/>

<sup>117</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/02/16/narendra-modis-hindu-nationalism-gives-rise-vigilante-attacks/>

Anti-conversion laws continue to threaten religious minorities in particular Christians, Muslims and scheduled caste (Dalits) – USCIRF have commented they “create a hostile, and on occasion violent, environment for religious minority communities because they do not require any evidence to support accusations of wrongdoing”.<sup>118</sup> On 21 June, Pastor Rao was dragged and badly beaten on the false accusation of conversion by a violent mob of over 150 men.<sup>119</sup> Muslims and Christians are often arrested by the officials on false charges of conversions. Haryana has become the latest state to consider the introduction of such a law.

Cow slaughter vigilantes continue to create sectarian violence.<sup>120</sup> It often leads to brutal incidents of mob lynching.<sup>121</sup> The police and the state are seen as complicit in this violence.<sup>122</sup>

The lockdown continues in Indian-administered Kashmir alongside a major crackdown against the civilian population, civil society organisations and activists. Several laws have been passed to change the demography of the Muslim-majority states of Jammu and Kashmir. Since May 2020, over 25,000 non-local people have been given settlement rights whereas the locals are forced to live in an atmosphere of fear and a complete shutdown and their freedom is curbed.<sup>123</sup> On 29 August Shi’a Muslims were attacked and pellets were fired by the security forces on participating in the Muharram procession, an important religious procession. Over 200 Shi’a Muslims were detained and over seven were arrested under anti-terror law.<sup>124</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/india/>

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<sup>118</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/anti-conversion-laws-in-india-states-religious-conversion-1752402-2020-12-23>

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.persecution.org/2020/06/26/incidents-christian-persecution-spike-india-emerges-lockdown/>

<sup>120</sup> <https://theprint.in/india/better-to-have-killed-me-man-thrashed-by-cow-vigilantes-says-wont-transport-meat-again/475034/>

<sup>121</sup> <https://mattersindia.com/2020/08/are-you-part-of-mob-lynching-indias-democracy/>

<sup>122</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/18/violent-cow-protection-india/vigilante-groups-attack-minorities>

<sup>123</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/28/kashmir-muslims-fear-demographic-shift-as-thousands-get-residency>

<sup>124</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/9/20/why-the-indian-state-is-now-scared-of-the-kashmiri-shi'a/>

# IRAN

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population 84 million. Muslims are estimated to constitute 99.4 per cent of the population, of which 90-95 per cent are Shi'a, and 5-10 percent are Sunni. Unofficial reports estimate several million practice Sufism. Groups constituting the remaining less than 1 per cent include Bahá'ís (300,000), Christians (possibly up to one million<sup>125</sup>), Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Bahá'ís, Christians, and Yarsanis.<sup>126</sup> It is impossible to identify the size of the non-religious population.

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The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and specifies Twelver Ja'afari Shi'a Islam as the official state religion. It states all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and an official interpretation of *sharia*. The penal code specifies the death sentence for proselytizing and attempts by non-Muslims to convert Muslims; the law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs.<sup>127</sup>

In the reporting period for this document, November 2019 – 2020, pressure on Christian pastors remains in effect. In August 2020 Pastor Mohammadreza Omidi was released from prison, after serving four years imprisonment alongside three other Christian clergy. In September Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported that Pastor Omidi has been order to spend a further 2 years in internal exile.<sup>128</sup> Four Iranian Christian converts who were arrested in February were sent to prison after they were unable to afford bail. One feature of 2020 was a significant increase in bail demands.<sup>129</sup>

Across the period concurrent with the global health pandemic, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) has reported a spike in arrest, interrogations and detentions of Iranian Bahá'ís. In June 2020 the BIC reported the targeting of at least 77 Bahá'ís in multiple locations for either arrest, summons to court, sentencing or imprisonment in jail.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/september/iran-christian-conversions-gamaan-religion-survey.html>

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>

<sup>128</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide press release 4th September 2020 - <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/09/04/press/4786/article.htm>

<sup>129</sup> <https://www.persecution.org/2020/05/17/iranian-christian-converts-imprisoned/>

<sup>130</sup> Bahá'í World News Service story, June 11 2020 - <https://news.bahai.org/story/1433/>

Iran's longstanding policy to deny Bahá'ís access to education, as codified in a 1991 policy memorandum of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council,<sup>131</sup> continued. In July 2020 the Centre for Human Rights in Iran reported the case of 15-year-old Adib Vai, a Bahá'í child who was expelled from a school in Karaj solely on account of his religious faith.<sup>132</sup>

This reporting period has also seen an escalation in a previous trend of use of Tazir laws.<sup>133</sup> In December 2019 a Bahá'í Mazandaran was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment under Tazir provisions, significantly longer than tariffs of 1 or 2 years seen previously.

In August 2020 the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) published a factsheet on Iranian officials sanctioned for violating freedom of religion or belief with details of six senior figures, including Mohammed Golpayegani, who issued the 1991 secret memorandum on "the Bahá'í Question".<sup>134</sup>

USCIRF noted that in March "...several Sufis were convicted on spurious national security charges and sentenced to prison, lashings and internal exile."<sup>135</sup> This same report also notes that in February three Torah scrolls were stolen from a Synagogue in Tehran but police did not investigate.

For atheists and secularists, the expression of non-religious views has been severely persecuted in Iran and is rendered practically impossible due to severe social stigma. It is also likely to be met with hatred or violence. In Iran it is illegal to declare oneself to be an atheist or non-religious.

In February 2017, Professor Ahmadreza Djalali, who worked for the Free University in Brussels, was arrested and threatened with the death sentence by Iranian security forces, who accused him of "collaborating with scientists from hostile nations" and "enmity against God". Since his arrest his physical and mental condition has worsened and reports in November 2020 suggest his execution is imminent.<sup>136</sup>

Reports indicate that the period of the COVID-19 crisis has witnessed a ratcheting up of the substantive and wide-ranging denial of freedom of religion or belief to members of recognised and non-recognised religious communities as well as secular or atheist Iranians.

APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/iran/>

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<sup>131</sup> See provisional translation, Section B, of this document to English here:

<https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/pdf/iran/1991%20Bahai%20Question%20Memo%20ENG.pdf>

<sup>132</sup> Center for Human Rights, 15th July 2020 - <https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/07/bahai-youth-expelled-from-secondary-school-for-gifted-students-solely-due-to-his-faith/>

<sup>133</sup> Tazir laws are understood to refer to punishments in Islamic law that are left to the discretion of a Qadi (judge) where offences are not covered by the Qur'an.

<sup>134</sup> USCIRF Iran Sanctions Factsheet - [https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Factsheet%20-%20Iran%20Sanctions\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Factsheet%20-%20Iran%20Sanctions_0.pdf)

<sup>135</sup> USCIRF, Annual Report 2020 – see pages 24 and 25.

[https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>136</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-55231310>

# IRAQ

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population 40 million people; Shi'a Muslims (64-69 per cent), Sunni Muslims (29-34 per cent), Christians 1 per cent (includes Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Assyrian Church of the East) and other smaller groups such as Yazidis (1-4 per cent).<sup>137</sup> There has been a decline in religious minority population: Christians numbered 1.5 million before the 2003 invasion, now reduced to 250,000<sup>138</sup>. Similarly, Yazidis also claim that their numbers have decreased to somewhere between 400,000-500,000<sup>139</sup> - 400,000 are in IDP camps. It is impossible to identify the size of the non-religious population.

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Life for religious minorities has not been easy in Iraq in the last three decades. Even in what is seen as the post-Daesh<sup>140</sup> phase,<sup>141</sup> religious minorities such as Yazidis, Sabeen-Mandaeans,<sup>142</sup> Kakais, Shabaks and Turkmen, still struggle to find solace.<sup>143</sup> The Mandaean community in Iraq is dwindling to such low numbers that its members fear extinction.<sup>144</sup> Some 2,800 Yazidi women are missing. Iraqi courts have so far ignored the demand of Yazidi leaders to try Daesh commanders for war crimes.<sup>145</sup> Both Yazidis and Christians are subject to regular violence and often blamed for the spread of COVID-19. The level of violence faced by Christians increased sharply in 2020, and the widespread instability is a catalyst for ongoing persecution.<sup>146</sup>

The return of religious minorities from internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps remains a challenge. Between 30-50 per cent population of Chaldeans, Assyrians and Christians—who have mostly taken refuge in Erbil and KRG region—are likely to return, a significant number of Yazidis are still exile and present in the camps such as in Duhok.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, in Alqosh, a sub-district in Tal Kaif district, according to one estimate, around 5,000 Christian IDPs have returned. In general, however, tens of thousands are yet to return.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/#people-and-society>

<sup>138</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48333923>

<sup>139</sup> Dorjee, T., 2019 Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF, April 2019, page 191, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

<sup>140</sup> Daesh - also known in English as Islamic State, IS, ISIL, ISIS

<sup>141</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50850325>

<sup>142</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/sabian-mandaeans/>

<sup>143</sup> P73 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>144</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/iraq-minority-mandaen.html#ixzz6mp2Dx4CH>

<sup>145</sup> P73 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>146</sup> [https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?\\_ga=2.14172471.1449146661.1611142015-547195203.1610233542](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?_ga=2.14172471.1449146661.1611142015-547195203.1610233542)

<sup>147</sup> P73 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>148</sup> <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62332>



Iranian-backed Shi'a militia groups in Northern Iraq are cited as the prime reason many internally-displaced Christians have not yet resettled. Archbishop Warda, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil, called the presence of armed militias "a malignant cancer" that are "at the root of much of the corruption and never-ending civil unrest" in the country, "and the minorities continue to be abused in the middle." He confirmed reports of physical violence or harassment of Christians, militia-armed checkpoints, and businesses requiring the backing of militias.<sup>149</sup>

Displaced persons returning to their former homes creates frictions, particularly when others have moved into vacated areas. Bartella, a northern town near Mosul, once a Christian stronghold, has seen tension between returning Christians and Shabaks who have moved into the area.<sup>150</sup>

COVID-19 has had a serious impact on the livelihoods of religious minorities. The Armenian minority with estimated population of 20,000, who mostly live in Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk and Kurdistan Region, are among those who are affected by COVID-19 and, as a result, lost their businesses.<sup>151</sup> Christians in Alqosh experienced a dire situation during COVID-19 due to absence of protective gear and medical supplies.<sup>152</sup>

The smaller groups such as Bahá'ís are not formally recognised and, as a result, their freedom to worship is sometimes undermined. Humanists, atheists and secularists are the focus of particularly pernicious repression. There is a pattern of impunity or collusion in violence by state actors against the non-religious. They are considered to be 'apostasizers and blasphemers'. The Iraqi Penal Code criminalises blasphemy with up to three years imprisonment. Members of other faiths and those identifying as agnostics, atheists, humanists are not able to record their faith identity on national ID cards.<sup>153</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/iraq/>

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<sup>149</sup> <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/08/21/iraqi-prime-minister-tells-christians-to-come-home-but-is-it-safe/>

<https://www.meconcern.org/2019/08/08/iraq-intimidation-of-nineveh-plain-christians/>

<sup>150</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/northern-iraq-communities-divided-over-demographic-change-summary>

<sup>151</sup> <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62536>

<sup>152</sup> <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62332>

<sup>153</sup> [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

# JORDAN

## The impact of COVID-19 for refugees fleeing religious persecution

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has a long tradition of providing shelter to refugees fleeing persecution. UNHCR figures indicate numbers at 744,795, with 2 million registered Palestinians of long-term standing. There are 89 refugees per 1,000 nationals.<sup>154</sup>

67,225 Iraqis are registered,<sup>155</sup> with estimates of 3,000 in UNHCR camps (anecdotal). Whilst stated by the US DOS/UNPFA that “estimating the size is difficult, as some Iraqis may have entered without a legal permit”,<sup>156</sup> detailed records kept by churches indicate Iraqi refugees are legal entrants with UNHCR registration certificates. One INGO records support of 8,000 refugees per month for basic social service rights since 2014.<sup>157</sup> 60,000 Iraqi refugees are estimated to be in urban areas, close to church communities. They will not reside in UNHCR camps due to the threat of religious persecution.

In 2014, when Daesh invaded Iraq, Christian and minority communities were targeted, and many forced to flee under threat of persecution. Family members and friends were killed in the onslaught of brutality that followed; others separated from family in the ensuing chaos. Those who sought refuge in Erbil lived in camps, temporary housing and even cemeteries.

The Iraqi Christians that have sought refuge in Jordan are legally unable to work, and risk deportation and/or heavy fines if they are caught. When they fled Iraq, they left without belongings, their bank accounts frozen. They do not have the funds necessary to live. As religious minorities, they do not receive mainstream government support. They depend on churches, and limited NGOs. Whilst this support is appreciated, it is not sustainable for the NGOs.

The lack of access to employment and a right to work, in parallel with the impact of COVID-19 on INGO funding has particularly exacerbated the extreme poverty. Whilst the government have opened formal employment opportunities for Syrians, this has not been extended to Iraqis, even to highly skilled professionals. Currently this is unlikely to change, due to the existing MOU between Jordan and the UNHCR,<sup>158</sup> and to increasing unemployment rates of 23 per cent in 2020, the highest jobless rate since 2005.<sup>159</sup> However, the expectation of refugees to live in an economy with no income is unsustainable. It is recommended a strategic policy shift by the government be considered.

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<sup>154</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/jo/12449-unhcr-continues-to-support-refugees-in-jordan-throughout-2019.html>

<sup>155</sup> External Statistical Report on UNHCR Registered Iraqis as of 15 November 2020

<sup>156</sup> [http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos\\_home\\_e/main/IraqisinJordan.pdf](http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos_home_e/main/IraqisinJordan.pdf)

<sup>157</sup> <https://mosaicmiddleeast.org/who-we-are/our-impact>

<sup>158</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/528a0a2c13.pdf>

<sup>159</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/jordan/unemployment-rate>

There is an ongoing need for medical support across all refugee communities. Whilst UNHCR efforts included \$1.2million to the Ministry of Health during COVID-19,<sup>160</sup> refugees living outside camps have limited access to assistance. There is no integration mechanism by the UNHCR between medical treatment in camps and providing care to those outside. Given most Iraqi Christian refugees reside outside camps, this is a serious neglect of their social service needs.<sup>161</sup>

There is no mechanism in place to expedite applications with refugees who meet the necessary criteria for emigration even with urgent medical conditions.

There is currently no government subsidy for refugees built into the hospital system. Often refugees with serious medical conditions are treated on a case-by-case basis, the costs met by NGOs. A taskforce working with government, UNHCR and civil society groups is recommended, with a strategic policy shift to help protect the refugee communities and provide access to subsidised medical care.

Iraqi Christians fleeing religious persecution continue to experience considerable suffering, particularly in accessing the most basic social services under the recommendations of Article 18, exacerbated by COVID-19. There is little change from the 2018 Refugees International report that “tens of thousands of refugees ... are left out of most humanitarian assistance programmes aimed at Syrians.”<sup>162</sup> This is despite their plight being directly linked to the impact of the Syrian crisis.

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<sup>160</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/jo/13189-unhcr-begins-distribution-of-emergency-cash-assistance-appeals-for-79-million.html>

<sup>161</sup> <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/non-syrian-refugees-suffer-even-more-jordan-compact>

<sup>162</sup> <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/non-syrian-refugees-suffer-even-more-jordan-compact>

# KAZAKHSTAN

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Kazakhstan has over 18 million people; about two-thirds are seen as having a Muslim background with the rest being mainly seen as having a Christian background.<sup>163</sup>

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Serious systemic violations of many human rights take place in the country.<sup>164</sup> All exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission is illegal, all mosques outside state control are banned, and all forms of Islam apart from Sunni Hanafi Islam are banned. There is strict censorship of all religious books such as the Bible and Koran, objects such as Russian Orthodox icons, and a ban on Islamic literature that is neither Hanafi Muslim nor Muslim Board approved. There are also strict limits on where texts and objects can be bought or given away, which are enforced with police raids. Religious communities of under 50 people are illegal. All discussion of faith by people without state permission, or not using state-approved texts, or not taking place in state-approved locations, is banned.<sup>165</sup>

Prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief are primarily alleged adherents of Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat.<sup>166</sup> One verdict claimed the defendant was “intolerant” towards Shi’a Islam – even though the regime itself has banned all Shi’a mosques and literature. 30-year-old Sunni Muslim Dadash Mazhenov was jailed on 13 October 2020 for nearly eight years on “terrorism” charges, after being arrested in 2018, jailed, tortured, acquitted, and put on trial again.<sup>167</sup> His “crime” was to post online four Islamic talks, which he later deleted.<sup>168</sup>

Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Protecting Human Rights while Countering Terrorism, found that “the broad formulation of the concepts of ‘extremism’, ‘inciting social or class hatred’, and ‘religious hatred or enmity’ in national law are used to unduly restrict freedoms of religion, expression, assembly and association”.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Forum 18’s reports on particular freedom of religion and belief violations in Kazakhstan are at <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=29> and Forum 18’s September 2018 Kazakhstan religious freedom survey is at [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2409](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2409)

<sup>164</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/kazakhstan>

<sup>165</sup> [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2409](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2409)

<sup>166</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2409](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2409)

<sup>167</sup> [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2170](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2170)

<sup>168</sup> [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2608](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2608)

<sup>169</sup> [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2566](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2566)

From January to December 2019 at least 140 individuals, two religious communities, and one company were punished for meeting for worship without state permission, offering religious literature and items (including online), sharing or teaching faith, posting religious material online, Muslims praying in mosques in banned ways such as saying the word Amen aloud, inviting a child to meetings, or allegedly inadequate security measures. Fines were the equivalent of between three weeks' and four months' average wages for those in formal work. Yet an official claimed to Forum 18 that: "We have no problems in the area of freedom of conscience."<sup>170</sup>

After a March 2020 raid on Baptists meeting for worship in Pavlodar despite COVID-19 restrictions, Pastor Isak Neiman was warned for violating anti-COVID-19 measures. But after accepting the warning, he was fined nearly two months' average wages on a second charge of leading an unregistered religious community meeting for worship without state permission. Officials in Aktobe fined a shopping centre administrator for allowing Muslims to pray in a unit there.<sup>171</sup>

In April 2020, 24 individuals were known to be in jail serving sentences of up to eight years for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief (one of these is on trial for a second time on the same charges). In addition, a further 6 individuals are known to be serving restricted freedom sentences for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. All but one of both groups are Sunni Muslim men.<sup>172</sup>

**APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:**

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/kazakhstan/>

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<sup>170</sup> [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2532](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2532)

<sup>171</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2574](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2574)

<sup>172</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2566](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2566)

# MALAYSIA

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Over 60 per cent of the population of about 33 million are Muslim, predominantly Sunni; around 20 per cent are Buddhist, nearly 10 per cent Christian, 6 per cent Hindu. Other religions represented include Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese philosophies and religions, animists, Sikhs, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Bahá'ís.<sup>173</sup>

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Malaysia's Constitution Article 3 (1) states "Islam is the Religion of the Federation' but ...religions other than Islam may be practiced in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation". In practice Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims are considered 'illegal', a threat to public order.

Under its Article 11, freedom of religion or belief is the first of special rights guaranteed under an inter-governmental agreement with the UK (and others), the Malaysia Agreement. However, this freedom to profess and practice one's religion must not result in an act contrary to any general law relating to public order, health or morality.

Apostasy laws forbid conversion from Islam in all but one state. While proselytism among Malays is technically not illegal under federal law, it is illegal in the more powerful state law in 10 of 13 states.

The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) attempted in 2018 to introduce the Islamic penal code 'hudood' at the national level.

Religiously motivated ethno-centrism is frequently politicised, with increasing intolerance towards Chinese, Indian and indigenous tribespeople - most Christians belong to these groups.

Freedom of religion or belief issues mostly challenge the supremacy of the Constitution and whether *sharia*/Ulema council rulings (especially under state law) can take precedence over it such as:

A 2009 to 2014 case: 'Allah' (which entered Bahasa Malay from Arabic centuries ago) is also used by Christians for 'their' God. The government forbade 'The Herald' (Catholic) from using it in print. The publication's right was upheld, but it lost it in 2013 after the government appealed. The Herald won again, but then lost after another government appeal in 2014. Christians feared they would have to find another completely new word, but the ruling seemed only to apply to print publications. (In recent years, the government has seized more than 20,000 Bibles).

Linked to this, Jill Ireland, a Christian, was in 2015 given back CDs (using 'Allah') after customs seized them in 2008. In 2017, she sued that the court denied her constitutional right to use 'Allah'.<sup>174</sup> Her lawyer argued no-

<sup>173</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/malaysia/>

<sup>174</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/10/jill-ireland-back-court-malaysia-considers-christians-right-call-god-allah/>

one can claim “exclusive rights” to ‘Allah’. Global Muslim leaders and UN human rights bodies decried Malaysia’s decision to ‘copyright’ ‘Allah’ for Muslims’ exclusive use, but a years-delayed ruling that was due in January 2021 continues to be postponed, now due to COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>175</sup>

The same week Ireland received her CDs, a bookshop manager was acquitted of stocking a banned book by a ‘reformist’ Muslim writer, even though the government ban came six days after he took delivery!<sup>176</sup>

In Feb 2017, a Protestant pastor Raymond Koh<sup>177</sup> was abducted. In April 2019, the Human Rights Commission inquiry concluded that the Special Branch was behind his disappearance, as too of Amri Che Mat, founder of an NGO accused of spreading Shi’a Islam, similarly abducted in November 2016. There is evidence Special Branch had Che Mat under surveillance for 3 days before he disappeared.

An Indonesian, Ruth Sitepu and her husband Joshua Hilmy, a Muslim convert to Christianity, also disappeared 6 days after Che Mat was abducted: nothing has been heard of either since.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Jill Ireland won her case. Kuala Lumpur High Court ruled 10.3.21 that all non-Muslims have right to use ‘Allah’ for religious and educational purposes, as government ‘erred’ in issuing a ban on this in 1986.

<sup>176</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/malaysian-islamic-authorities-withdraw-charges/>

<sup>177</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/tag/raymond-koh/>

<sup>178</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-39252139>

# NEPAL

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Nepal's population of 31 million<sup>179</sup> is majority Hindu (81 per cent) with 9 per cent Buddhists, 4.4 per cent Muslims and 1.4 per cent Christians - but note that this is one of the fastest growing Christian communities in the world:<sup>180</sup> from zero Christians in 1951, in 2001 there were over 100,000 and in 2011, 375,000; many put the number much higher.

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With President Modi's BJP Hindu growing nationalist agenda in neighbouring India, Nepal is under pressure to make Hinduism its pre-eminent national religion.

Nepal's 2015 Constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief and the freedom of expression. While it officially recognized Nepal as a secular state, a new Code in August 2018<sup>181</sup> criminalised religious conversion, whether coerced or not. Anyone who converts a person "*from one religion to another or make attempt to or abet such conversion*" risks up to five years in prison and a fine of up to US\$415 (Penal Code, Art. 26.3). This broad language has led to the imprisonment of individuals who exercise their constitutional right to profess and practice religion, as well as to simply exercise their guaranteed freedom of speech, which brings violation of obligations under the ICCPR.

Nepal has used the pandemic and its vague Penal code as cover for arbitrary arrests and denial of fundamental rights.

The majority of Muslims live near the Indian border, affected by Indian media campaigns portraying Muslims as responsible for the spread of COVID-19; cases of discrimination and physical violence resulted - by state and non-state actors;<sup>182</sup> On April 21, 2020, 4 Muslim employees were expelled from a factory in Rupandehi, falsely accused of that they were carrying COVID-19. In May, several Muslims in the Parsa District sustained injuries after an attack by a group of Hindus.

The Intellectual Muslims Association of Nepal (IMAN) reported to police dozens of online posts and distribution of anti-Muslim hate messages.

A Christian pastor, Keshav Raj Acharya, was arrested in Kaski on 22 March 2020 - before lockdown orders - for a prayer (that the COVID-19 would "go away and die" in Jesus' name) on YouTube on February 22, 2020. He was imprisoned for violating public health orders, even though he prayed inside his church **before** lockdown restrictions. The court fined him, then released him on 29 March. However, police immediately re-arrested him on new charges of "conversion activities" (Section 158, Penal Code), alleging proselytism by spreading

<sup>179</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/nepal/#people-and-society>

<sup>180</sup> World Christian Database

<sup>181</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/nepals-criminalisation-of-conversion-a-direct-infringement-of-religious-freedom/>

<sup>182</sup> <https://files.constantcontact.com/c5fd56509e/7e2ec447-8af9-4eee-94aa-20750e17c5ff.pdf>



false information and charging him with “outraging religious feelings” and “attempting to convert others”. Police then created a duplicate case transferring Acharya to the remote Dolpa District - far from his lawyer and family - violating his right to a fair trial. The Christian Society filed a writ of *habeas corpus*, but the appeals court upheld the unjust acts of the Kaski Police and the district court by cancelling the writ. Nepal’s National Human Right Commission failed to act. Pastor Acharya was released again on bail on 30 June to await trial at the time of this report.

Christians, Muslims, Jains, Buddhists, Bahá’ís and other religious minority groups cannot register their places of worship as religious organisations.<sup>183</sup>

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<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/nepal/>

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<sup>183</sup> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/05/01/report/4638/article.htm>

# NIGERIA

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Nigeria is a country of 208 million people. While there are no official indicators of religious affiliation, most analysts conclude it is roughly evenly divided between Muslims (predominantly in the north and mainstream Sunni but also including Sufi and Shi'a sects) and Christians (mainly in the south, including Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Evangelical, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other denominations), while approximately 2 per cent belong to other or no religious groups.<sup>184</sup> Many individuals syncretize indigenous animism with Islam or Christianity. The remaining population is made up of small communities of Jews, Bahá'ís, atheists, and holders of indigenous beliefs.<sup>185</sup>

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The 2020 APPG report **NIGERIA: UNFOLDING GENOCIDE?**<sup>186</sup> highlighted the extent of the continuing violence in Nigeria, particularly aimed at Christians.

It recognises the continuing atrocities perpetrated by Islamist extremist groups claiming allegiance to Daesh/Islamic State - Boko Haram and other related splinter groups. According to International Committee of the Red Cross, at least 22,000 people, 60 per cent of them are children, are missing since the decade-long conflict with Boko Haram.<sup>187</sup> Since 2009, two million people have been displaced due to Boko Haram violence.<sup>188</sup>

In December 2019, ISIS-West Africa released a video of the killing of 11 Christians.<sup>189</sup> Leah Sharibu, abducted by Boko Haram three years ago, remains in captivity.<sup>190</sup> On 26 September 2020, at least 11 people were killed in an attack on a security convoy in north-eastern Nigeria.<sup>191</sup>

The APPG report emphasises that inter-communal violence triggered largely by Fulani herders has exacted a higher death toll than Boko Haram and its linked groups, stressing that while there are multiple drivers of conflict, some Fulani herders have adopted a comparable strategy to Boko Haram and ISWAP and “demonstrated a clear intent to target Christians and symbols of Christian identity such as churches.”

The International Crisis Group (ICG) estimate that over 300,000 people have been displaced and that the violence has claimed the lives of six times more people than the conflict with Boko Haram.<sup>192</sup> CSW estimates

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<sup>184</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nigeria/>

<sup>185</sup> [https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1\\_NIGERIA\\_2019.pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_NIGERIA_2019.pdf)

<sup>186</sup> <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/200615-Nigeria-Unfolding-Genocide-Report-of-the-APPG-for-FoRB.pdf>

<sup>187</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/12/22000-nigerians-missing-since-boko-haram-crisis-began-red-cross>

<sup>188</sup> P27 [https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>189</sup> P27 [https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>190</sup> <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-rising-threat-of-genocide-against-christians-in-nigeria>

<sup>191</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/26/several-killed-in-attack-on-security-convoy-in-northeast-nigeria>

<sup>192</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence. Africa Report No. 262' (ICG, 2018). Available at: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence.pdf>

that between March 2020 to 6 August 2020, Fulani militia carried out 28 attacks in five local government areas, killing 185 people, burning 165 houses and leaving 50 people missing in different parts of the country.<sup>193</sup>

Recent reports underline the extent of ongoing violence. USCIRF (February 2021) states “Violent Islamist groups based in northern Nigeria remain some of the deadliest and most formidable jihadist groups operating in the world today. Estimates suggest that conflict with groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province has resulted in the deaths of more than 37,500 people since 2011, and there is a reasonable basis to believe that these groups have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.”<sup>194</sup> Open Doors World Watch List report 2021 states “Christians are more at risk of violent attack in Nigeria than in any other country. More than 3,000 were killed in 2020, the level of violence described as ‘unprecedented’.”<sup>195</sup>

The Islamist groups also attack Muslims. Fulani Muslims have experienced retaliatory attacks.<sup>196</sup> The Federal government continued its crackdown against Shi’as, particularly the Islamic Mission of Nigeria (IMN), proscribed in July 2019.<sup>197</sup> The UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions said that the government had not provided any concrete evidence to justify its ban on IMN.<sup>198</sup>

The treatment of the non-religious in Nigeria is also severe. Mubarak Bala, President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, was rescued in 2014 from a psychiatric ward where he was detained on the grounds that he was an atheist. He was detained again in April 2020, alleged to have insulted the Prophet in his Facebook posts. After continued obstruction by the Nigerian authorities, he was allowed to meet his legal representative in October 2020. His case has been repeatedly postponed.

The APPG report concludes with several recommendations for the UK government to pursue to reduce violence and protect FoRB.<sup>199</sup>

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<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/nigeria/>

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<sup>193</sup> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/10/05/feature/4835/article.htm>

<sup>194</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021%20Factsheet%20-%20Violent%20Islamists%20in%20Northern%20Nigeria.pdf>

<sup>195</sup> [https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?\\_ga=2.68859921.1475676765.1613559336-547195203.1610233542](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?_ga=2.68859921.1475676765.1613559336-547195203.1610233542)

<sup>196</sup> <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/investigationspecial-reports/416497-investigation-inside-the-bloody-southern-kaduna-carnage-where-all-sides-are-casualties.html>

<sup>197</sup> P27 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>198</sup> <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/351525-shiites-hold-procession-despite-police-warning.html>

<sup>199</sup> <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/200615-Nigeria-Unfolding-Genocide-Report-of-the-APPG-for-FoRB.pdf>

# NORTH KOREA – (DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA)

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Population 26 million. It is officially an atheist country, but it is estimated that more than 1 per cent - around 300,000 - are Christian.<sup>200</sup> The country is also home to small numbers of adherents of Buddhism, Confucianism, Shamanism and a local religious movement known as Chondoism.<sup>201</sup>

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The DPRK remains the world’s most brutally repressive state.<sup>202</sup> The North Korean constitution nominally grants freedom of religious belief, but it also prohibits the use of religion for “drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State.”

The country is heavily isolationist and totalitarian in nature, subscribing to the ideologies of “Juche” and “Kimilsungism”. The Party leader is the supreme authority. Thus any religious practice that undermines this authority is perceived as a significant threat to the regime. Christians are especially vulnerable because the government views them as susceptible to foreign influence. In 2019 there were reports that the Falun Gong movement, which originated in China, was spreading to North Korea, prompting authorities to initiate a crackdown against Falun Gong practitioners.<sup>203</sup>

Any expression of religion outside the limited number of state-sponsored houses of worship, which fulfil merely propaganda purposes,<sup>204</sup> happens in secret. Anyone caught practicing religion or even suspected of harbouring religious views in private is subject to severe punishment, including arrest, torture, imprisonment, and execution. The possession and distribution of religious texts remains a criminal offense under North Korean law.

The *songbun* system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state; religious practitioners belong to the “hostile” class, which limits their access to educational and employment opportunities, as well as other state benefits. Religion is identified as a national security threat capable of disrupting the state’s social order.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> World Watch List: North Korea, Open Doors, 2020, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/north-korea/>

<sup>201</sup> Dorjee, Tenzin. et al., 2019 Annual Report and Recommendations for World’s Most Egregious Violators of Religious Freedom, USCIRF, 29 April 2019, page 67, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

<sup>202</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/north-korea/>

<sup>203</sup> <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-falun-gong-05172019164536.html>

<sup>204</sup> World Watch Research Unit, North Korea: Country Dossier, Open Doors International, January 2019, page 10, <https://www.opendoors.org.za/app/uploads/2019/01/North-Korea-WWR-COUNTRY-DOSSIER-January-2019-update.pdf>

<sup>205</sup> Total Denial: North Korea Report 2019, CSW Website, 22 September 2016, pp. 6-7, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2016/09/22/report/3263/article.htm>

North Korea has prison and labour camps housing an estimated 80,000–120,000 prisoners of conscience and other declared “enemies of the state,” many of whom are imprisoned because of their faith. As many as 50,000 of these prisoners are Christians.<sup>206</sup> Religious prisoners typically undergo “unspeakable atrocities” including torture, rape, starvation, forced abortion and extra-judicial killing.<sup>207</sup> According to defectors, most Christians detained in prison camps were arrested by the Ministry of State Security because they possessed a Bible— which is treated as proof of a political crime. The government often apply a policy of guilt by association – if one person is found to be a Christian, all other members of their extended family may be arrested or executed.<sup>208</sup>

Meanwhile, authorities on both sides of the Sino-Korean border have increased monitoring for North Korean refugees, to prevent “religious infiltration” from abroad. This has increased because of the COVID-19 global pandemic where increased security on borders aims to prevent outsiders bringing the disease into the country. Kim Jung Un claims there are zero cases.<sup>209</sup> After the Hong Kong protests in June 2019, the Chinese government started scanning visitor identity cards and making it more difficult for South Korean missionaries and North Korean defectors to move around the border region. In addition, North Korean authorities monitor refugees and defectors deported from China for fear they have been exposed to religion or foreign missionaries while outside the country.

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<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/north-korea/>

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<sup>206</sup> Dorjee, Tenzin. et al., 2019 Annual Report and Recommendations for World’s Most Egregious Violators of Religious Freedom, USCIRF, 29 April 2019, page 68, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

<sup>207</sup> Total Denial: North Korea report 2016, CSW Website, 22 September 2016, pp. 3; 16, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2016/09/22/report/3263/article.htm>

<sup>208</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/north-korea/>

<sup>209</sup> Walsh. M, Xiao. B., BBC, 29 April 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-30/kim-jong-un-north-korea-no-coronavirus-cases-doubts-experts/12189200>

# PAKISTAN

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population 211 million. 96 per cent Muslims (of them, 80-85 per cent Sunni, 15-20 per cent Shi'a); Christians 1.6 per cent; Hindus 1.6 per cent. Community sources put the number of Ahmadi Muslims at approximately 500,000-600,000. Estimates of the Zikri Muslim community, located in Balochistan, range between 500,000 and 800,000 individuals.<sup>210</sup> It is impossible to identify the size of the non-religious population.

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One report suggests between August 2018 to February 2020, at least 31 members of religious minorities were killed, 58 were injured, there were 25 blasphemy cases and seven places of worship were attacked.<sup>211</sup>

2020 witnessed a huge rise in anti-Shi'a violence and hatred. Since 30 August 2020, at least five Shi'as have been killed, more than 30 blasphemy cases were registered against the community members and at least one religious congregation was attacked.<sup>212</sup> At least four big anti-Shi'a rallies were organised in September 2020 in different cities of Pakistan.<sup>213</sup> On 12 September, extremists threw stones at a Shi'a place of worship in Karachi.<sup>214</sup> On 9 October, police manhandled and arrested 7 Shi'a women for participating in a religious procession.<sup>215</sup> The issue of Shi'a missing persons remains unresolved. According to one source, 33 Shi'as, including women, are still missing across Pakistan.

Ahmadiyya Muslims continued to face violence and discrimination. On 9 November 2020, an 82-year-old Ahmadi was shot dead in Peshawar.<sup>216</sup> On 6 October 2020, Ahmadi teacher Naeemuddin Khattak was murdered in Peshawar.<sup>217</sup> On 13 May 2020, the Punjab Assembly announced that Ahmadis could be part of the minority inclusion commission if they accept that they are non-Muslim.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>

<sup>211</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/religious-minorities-in-naya-pakistan/>

<sup>212</sup> [https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/the-changing-landscape-of-anti-shi'a-politics-in-pakistan/](https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/the-changing-landscape-of-anti-shi-a-politics-in-pakistan/)

<sup>213</sup> <https://www.shi'aresearch.com/shi'a-become-latest-target-of-pakistans-extremist-islamic-factions-murders-hate-speech-and-numerous-blasphemy-allegation-sow-seeds-of-long-term-religious-tension/>

<sup>214</sup> [https://nayadaur.tv/2020/09/extremist-outfits-hold-anti-shi'a-rally-in-karachi-pelt-stones-at-imambargah/](https://nayadaur.tv/2020/09/extremist-outfits-hold-anti-shi-a-rally-in-karachi-pelt-stones-at-imambargah/)

<sup>215</sup> <https://dailytimes.com.pk/676356/narowal-police-manhandles-arrests-multiple-women-for-conducting-religious-gathering/>

<sup>216</sup> <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/11/82-year-old-ahmadi-man-shot-dead-in-peshawar/>

<sup>217</sup> <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/05/make-ahmadis-accept-non-muslim-status-before-inclusion-in-minority-commission-pa-tells-federal-govt/>

<sup>218</sup> <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/05/make-ahmadis-accept-non-muslim-status-before-inclusion-in-minority-commission-pa-tells-federal-govt/>

On 7 May, Minister for Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony Noor-ul-Haq Qadri said whoever sympathises with Ahmadis can never be loyal to Pakistan.<sup>219</sup> In February 2020, a 100-year-old Ahmadiyya mosque was illegally occupied in Kasur, Punjab.<sup>220</sup>

On 29 April, the State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs tweeted, inciting violence against Ahmadis.<sup>221</sup> Four Pakistani clerics who were invited by the UK government to an interfaith event in March 2020 had to apologise and confirm their anti-Ahmadiyya belief after being criticised over meeting Lord Ahmad.<sup>222</sup>

Attacks on places of worships against the Hindu community continued, particularly in Sindh. On 6 July, for example, some young people in Islamabad demolished the under-construction Hindu temple which the federal government had approved earlier.<sup>223</sup>

Christians continued to face false blasphemy charges. On 8 September, a Christian man was sentenced to death over sending 'blasphemous' text message in Lahore.<sup>224</sup> On 31 August, a Christian man identified as David was arrested for allegedly 'desecrating the Holy Quran'.<sup>225</sup> On 25 February, a 22-year Christian labourer, Saleem Masih, was beaten and tortured in Chunian, Punjab, for 'polluting' a tube-well.<sup>226</sup> On 9 November, a Christian mother and son were shot dead in Gujranwala, Punjab.<sup>227</sup> On 28 January 2021, Tabitha Gill, a nurse, was beaten and arrested (later released, but forced into hiding) after being accused of blasphemy by hospital staff.<sup>228</sup>

Christian and Hindu girls are targeted for kidnapping, forced conversion and marriage<sup>229</sup> – an experience which usually includes sexual abuse. Every year up to 1,000 young women from these communities between 12 and 25 years of age are abducted – and this may be an under-estimate.<sup>230</sup> A Hindu girl, 14, was married to 40-year Mohammad Aachar Darejo in Sindh in April 2020. In the same province, in October 2020, a 13-year-old Christian girl, Arzoo Raja, was abducted and married to a 44-year Muslim man.<sup>231</sup> In August 2020, a Christian girl, Saneha Kinza Iqbal, was abducted and forcefully converted to Islam in Faisalabad, Punjab.<sup>232</sup> Even if the girls manage to escape, they can receive death threats from their former kidnappers.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/05/anyone-sympathising-with-ahmadis-is-disloyal-to-pakistan-says-minister/>

<sup>220</sup> <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/03/religious-minorities-in-naya-pakistan/>

<sup>221</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/news/creid-concerned-over-twitter-campaign-against-pakistans-ahmadi-community-including-tweet-by-senior-minister/>

<sup>222</sup> <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/03/4-pakistani-clerics-clarify-faith-after-mistakenly-meeting-uks-ahmadi-minister/>

<sup>223</sup> <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/07/youngster-demolishes-walls-of-under-construction-hindu-temple-in-islamabad/>

<sup>224</sup> <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/09/christian-man-accused-of-sending-blasphemous-text-messages-sentenced-to-death/>

<sup>225</sup> <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/08/nowshera-police-arrest-christian-man-accused-of-desecrating-holy-quran/>

<sup>226</sup> <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/03/religious-minorities-in-naya-pakistan/>

<sup>227</sup> <https://www.persecution.org/2020/11/11/mother-son-killed-incident-religious-hatred-pakistan/>

<sup>228</sup> <http://www.fides.org/en/news/69497->

[ASIA PAKISTAN Christian woman accused of blasphemy released by police after investigation](https://www.fides.org/en/news/69497-asia-pakistan-christian-woman-accused-of-blasphemy-released-by-police-after-investigation)

<sup>229</sup> <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/women-and-girls-victims-of-acts-of-violence-based-on-religion-or-belief/>

<sup>230</sup> <https://acnuk.org/our-campaigns/redwednesday/set-your-captives-free-report/>

<sup>231</sup> <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/10/13-year-old-christian-girl-allowed-to-go-with-44-year-old-abductor-husband/>

<sup>232</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/we-just-want-our-daughter-back-sanehas-parents-speak-out/>

<sup>233</sup> <https://acnuk.org/news/pakistan-maira-receives-death-threats/>

The non-religious are targeted by state actors and vigilante groups alike. There is a rising intolerance against liberal/progressive and atheist bloggers and authorities have failed to provide a safe environment. The government designates religious affiliation on identity documents such as passports and in national identity card applications. Applicants must state their religion when applying for a passport. “No Religion” is not accepted as an answer.

Gulalai Ismail, a leading human rights activist, was forced to flee from Pakistan in 2019. She was persecuted in 2019 for speaking out against sexual assaults and disappearances carried out by the Pakistani military. Ever since she relocated to the United States, her family in Pakistan have been subjected to increasing threats, harassment and intimidation from local security forces.<sup>234</sup>

During the first wave of COVID-19, religious minorities were discriminated against and blamed for the spread of the virus. Shi’a Hazaras were particularly singled out by the government of Balochistan. The virus was also called the ‘Shi’a virus’. Similarly, Christians and Hindus were discriminated during food ration distribution and denied aid on the basis of their religious identities.<sup>235</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/pakistan/>

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<sup>234</sup> <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/09/19/humanist-activist-gulalai-ismail-safe-in-us-after-escaping-pakistani-authorities/>

<sup>235</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/COVID-19-fans-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>



# RUSSIA

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Russia's<sup>236</sup> population is about 142 million<sup>237</sup> and are of many beliefs.<sup>238</sup> The percentage attending Russian Orthodox worship is at most about 3 per cent.<sup>239</sup>

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Serious systemic violations of many human rights take place.<sup>240</sup> Long-running “anti-extremism” campaigns<sup>241</sup> against Jehovah’s Witnesses<sup>242</sup> and Muslims who meet to read theologian Said Nursi’s works<sup>243</sup> continue. As of 23 November 2020, eight Jehovah’s Witnesses and one Muslim who met with others to study Nursi’s works are in labour camps as “extremists.”<sup>244</sup> Of 21 Jehovah's Witnesses convicted of “extremism” charges since late July 2020, six were given jail terms and 13 suspended sentences.<sup>245</sup> The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has condemned the “ever-growing number of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia who have been arrested, detained and charged with criminal activity on the basis of mere exercise of freedom of religion.”<sup>246</sup> There were at least 86 house searches between late October and mid-December, and three Muslims who met with others to study Islam with the writings of Said Nursi are known to be under criminal investigation.<sup>247</sup>

In what was a first for Russia, after Yevgeny Kim was in April 2019 released from a labour camp (where he had been jailed for meeting with other Muslims to study his faith),<sup>248</sup> he was deprived of his Russian citizenship leaving him stateless, fined, and ordered to be deported. The excuse given by the court was that he did not have a Russian internal passport. He did not have this as officials confiscated it the day before.<sup>249</sup> Similarly, in April 2020 Jehovah's Witnesses Feliks Makhmadiyev and Konstantin Bazhenov were also deprived of Russian citizenship. Like Kim, Makhmadiyev is now stateless.<sup>250</sup> Russia has been trying to deport Kim since 2019,<sup>251</sup> and might try to deport Makhmadiyev and Bazhenov when they complete their jail terms.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1\\_RUSSIA\\_2019.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_RUSSIA_2019.pdf)

<sup>238</sup> Forum 18's reports on FoRB violations in Russia are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=10>, its general Russia religious freedom survey is at [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2246](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246), and its “extremism” Russia religious freedom survey is at [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

<sup>239</sup> Geraldine Fagan, *Believing in Russia*, Routledge 2013, pp 24-25

<sup>240</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/russia>

<sup>241</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

<sup>242</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2247](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2247)

<sup>243</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

<sup>244</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2619](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2619)

<sup>245</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2620](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2620)

<sup>246</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2573](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2573)

<sup>247</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2624](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2624)

<sup>248</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2290](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2290)

<sup>249</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2478](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2478)

<sup>250</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2583](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2583)

<sup>251</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2585](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2585)

<sup>252</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2583](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2583)

Russia is using Interpol Red Notices to try to get back at least three citizens now based abroad to prosecute them for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Two are Muslims who met to study their faith using the writings of Said Nursi. These Red Notices violate Interpol's rules, which ban their use in ways that violate individuals' human rights.<sup>253</sup>

Impunity for torturers has long existed.<sup>254</sup> Muslim prisoner of conscience Yevgeny Kim following his 2015 arrest,<sup>255</sup> and seven Jehovah's Witnesses in 2019 were tortured. One of the victims was re-arrested after reporting the torture, and two of the officials implicated have been given awards.<sup>256</sup> Similarly, in February 2020 prison guards tortured five Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience in Orenburg, and National Guard officers tortured two adherents in Chita. The torture included beatings, choking and electric shocks. Contrary to international legal obligations, no-one has been arrested and put on criminal trial for any of these tortures, or more recent cases of torture during raids on Jehovah's Witness homes in Moscow.<sup>257</sup>

Other freedom of religion and belief violations<sup>258</sup> include use of July 2016 "anti-terrorism" restrictions against the sharing of beliefs and other manifestations of human rights.<sup>259</sup> For example, from January to June 2020 there were 98 prosecutions of religious organisations and individuals for not showing a full official name – even though such prosecutions of individuals are illegal. Most resulted in guilty verdicts and fines, and the largest increase in the number of prosecutions by religious community was of Muslims.<sup>260</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/russia/>

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<sup>253</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2584](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2584)

<sup>254</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2554](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2554)

<sup>255</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2332](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2332)

<sup>256</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2489](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2489)

<sup>257</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2623](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2623)

<sup>258</sup> <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=10>

<sup>259</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2246](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246)

<sup>260</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2610](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2610)

## OCCUPIED UKRAINIAN TERRITORY

In 2014 Russia illegally invaded and annexed the Ukrainian part of the Crimean peninsula,<sup>261</sup> and Russian-backed rebels illegally seized some eastern parts of Ukraine's Donbas Province. Serious systemic violations of many human rights take place in Russian-occupied Crimea,<sup>262</sup> and in Ukrainian territory controlled by the self-declared Luhansk (LPR) and Donetsk People's Republics (DPR).<sup>263</sup>

Russian freedom of religion or belief restrictions were imposed on the Crimean peninsula.<sup>264</sup> Since the invasion there have been raids, fines, religious literature seizures, official surveillance, expulsions of invited foreign religious leaders, unilateral cancellation of property rental contracts, and obstructions to regaining Soviet-confiscated places of worship.<sup>265</sup> Compulsory community re-registration was imposed, and of the 1,156 religious communities which had Ukrainian legal status only about 400 had gained Russian legal status by the 1 January 2016 deadline.<sup>266</sup>

Among recent freedom of religion and belief violations, Muslim Renat Suleimanov was jailed in January 2019 for four years for meeting openly in mosques with three friends to discuss their faith.<sup>267</sup> The second such jailing was of Jehovah's Witness Sergei Filatov, jailed on 5 March 2020 for meeting with family and friends to discuss religious themes.<sup>268</sup> The third such jailing was of Jehovah's Witness Artyom Gerasimov, who had met with others to discuss the Bible, and whose punishment was on 4 June changed from a fine of two years' average wages to a six-year jail term.<sup>269</sup>

Among other violations, places of worship have been targeted including the closure of a mosque in Zavetnoye. Police raided it in March, and in April Imam Dilyaver Khalilov was fined for leading Friday prayers. They authorities insist the mosque the community has been using since 2004 is not a mosque but a sports complex. Asked how the Muslim community should worship, Emil Velilyayev, deputy head of Sovetsky District, told Forum 18: "There is no community there."<sup>270</sup> In another example, the expulsion has been ordered of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine cathedral from the part of a larger building it occupies in the centre of the Crimean capital Simferopol<sup>271</sup>. Elsewhere, in the western Crimean city of Yevpatoriya, officials claim the Church's small wooden chapel was built illegally and have ordered the community to destroy it.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> <https://www.nhc.no/en/qa-breaches-of-international-law-and-human-rights-issues-2/>

<sup>262</sup> <https://www.freedomhouse.org/country/crimea/freedom-world/2020>

<sup>263</sup> <https://www.freedomhouse.org/country/eastern-donbas/freedom-world/2020>

<sup>264</sup> Forum 18's reports on particular freedom of religion and belief violations in occupied Crimea are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=86>

<sup>265</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2051](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051)

<sup>266</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2137](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2137)

<sup>267</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2444](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2444)

<sup>268</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2552](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2552)

<sup>269</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2577](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2577)

<sup>270</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2592](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2592)

<sup>271</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2525](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2525)

<sup>272</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2526](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2526)

In the occupied parts of **Ukraine's Donbas Province** (the self-declared LPR and DPR unrecognised entities),<sup>273</sup> serious freedom of religion and belief violations also take place. Recent violations in both entities target communities meeting for worship without state permission.

The LPR entity's rulers only permit Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (188 out of 195 permitted religious communities), Muslim, Old Believer, Jewish, and Catholic communities to exist. No non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Church, Protestant, Jehovah's Witness, Hare Krishna, or other communities which existed before the occupation are allowed to get registration and so to exist.<sup>274</sup> The LPR also bans many religious leaders from outside their territory from visiting their fellow believers, leaving them isolated. Also, in November 2019 the LPR banned 12 books published by the Council of Churches Baptists – including the Gospel of John in the most widely-used Russian translation – as “extremist.”<sup>275</sup>

The DPR entity's rulers also target religious communities meeting for worship without DPR permission. Almost all non-Moscow Patriarchate religious communities are denied registration and so permission to exist.<sup>276</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses have been particularly targeted for banning, being totally banned in September 2018.<sup>277</sup>

The DPR has seized numerous places of worship of a variety of faiths, including those of the Ukrainian Orthodox Kiev Patriarchate (now the Orthodox Church of Ukraine), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as the Mormons), Protestants, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Muslims.<sup>278</sup> Raids take place against communities who meet for worship without state permission.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Forum 18's reports on particular freedom of religion and belief violations in the occupied parts of Donbas Province are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=87>

<sup>274</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2540](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2540)

<sup>275</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2531](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531)

<sup>276</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2542](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2542)

<sup>277</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2428](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2428)

<sup>278</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2422](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2422)

<sup>279</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2542](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2542)

# SAUDI ARABIA

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population at 34 million, including more than 12 million foreign residents. Between 85 and 90 per cent of the approximately 20 million citizens are Sunni Muslims.<sup>280</sup> Saudi Arabia is known for its Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam, which only accounts for approximately 20 per cent of the population but is highly influential across the country.<sup>281</sup> Most of the Sunni population follow the Hanbali School of jurisprudence, with adherents of the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Sufi groups also present. Additionally, between 10-15 per cent of the population adhere to Shi'a Islam, mainly of the Twelver or Ithna'ashari grouping, with some Isma'ilis (approximately 700,000) and Zaydis also present in the country. Other groups, including Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh groups are also present.<sup>282</sup> The expatriate population includes two million non-Muslims: Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists.<sup>283</sup> It is impossible to identify the size of the non-religious population.

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Saudi Arabia does not tolerate public worship of any other religion or sect other than its Hanbali or Wahhabi version of Islam. It systematically discriminates against Shi'as and Ismailis in public education, justice system, employment. State-sanctioned religious authorities vilify Shi'a, Sufi and moderate Islamic interpretations in school textbooks, documents and public statements.<sup>284</sup>

Shi'as in the Eastern Province, which constitute 15 per cent of the population, are one of the most persecuted communities in the country. In April 2019, Saudi authorities executed 37 people, 32 of them were Shi'as. They were prosecuted over the charges of 'provoking sectarian strife' or 'disturbing security'. However, as different human rights organisations maintain, those Shi'as were executed merely on being Shi'a<sup>285</sup>.

Unfair trials and forced confessions are particularly used against Shi'as to execute and imprison them<sup>286</sup>. Amnesty International reviewed eight Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) trials of 68 Shi'as and has found that the majority was prosecuted only for participating in anti-government protest. Amnesty concluded that trials were 'grossly unfair' and based on 'torture-trained confessions'<sup>287</sup>. At least 20 Shi'a men who were tried by SCC have been sentenced to death on forced confession, 17 of them have already been executed<sup>288</sup>. Over 100 Shi'as on vague charges, including other nationalities, have been tried before the SCC<sup>289</sup>.

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<sup>280</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/>

<sup>281</sup> <https://religious-freedom-report.org/report/?report=814>

<sup>282</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/saudi-arabia/#people-and-society>

<sup>283</sup> P37 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>284</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/saudi-arabia#0c3936>

<sup>285</sup> P37 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>286</sup> P9 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2316332020ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>287</sup> P37 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2316332020ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>288</sup> P37 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2316332020ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>289</sup> P33 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2316332020ENGLISH.PDF>

One of the alarming trends is the prosecution of juvenile who are serving prison for participating in a peaceful protest held by Shi'as<sup>290</sup>. Murtaja Qureiris who is now aged 18 is prime example of Saudi's persecution of Shi'a juveniles. He was 16 when was moved to GDI prison in Dammam, an adult prison, and before the transfer, he was tortured and forced to confessed crimes which he did not commit<sup>291</sup>.

Shi'as are deprived of their basic freedom to practice their faith such as by banning public commemoration of Ashura which is central to Shi'a faith. Shi'as are also discriminated in public jobs such as a Shi'a man cannot become judge in ordinary courts, hold senior military or diplomatic post or become religious teacher<sup>292</sup>. Similarly, non-Muslim religious minorities and atheists are forbidden from practicing or expressing their beliefs in public.

Christians are often the victim of surveillance and intimidation from the authorities and struggle to practice their religion without fear. Authorities often raid their worship services and those who convert to Christianity from Muslim faith fear persecution if they reveal their conversion. The vilification of religious communities, particularly Christians, Shi'as and Jews, continues through textbooks. Christians and Jews are regarded as the 'enemy' of Islam.<sup>293</sup>

Liberals, freethinkers and atheists are often victim of arrest, torture and, in some cases, awarded the death penalty. Raif Badawi is the prisoner of conscience who has been in prison since 2012 for having liberal and dissenting views. Ahmad Al Shamri and Ashraf Fayadh are imprisoned for promoting atheist ideas and dissenting culture.<sup>294</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:  
<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/saudi-arabia/>

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<sup>290</sup> P7 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2316332020ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>291</sup> P36 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2316332020ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>292</sup> P31 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2316332020ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>293</sup> P37 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>294</sup> P37 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

# SRI LANKA

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population 23 million. Buddhists 70 per cent; Hindu 13 per cent, Muslim 10 per cent and Christian (6 per cent Roman Catholic and 1.3 per cent other Christian).<sup>295</sup>

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Radical groups and a strong religious nationalism, centred on preserving a Sri Lankan Buddhist identity, have continued to be influential. The persecution of Christians by Sinhala Buddhist nationalists has been on the increase for many years.<sup>296</sup>

ForB has been challenged following Easter 2019, when Islamist suicide bombers from a little-known radical group attacked three churches (two Catholic and one Protestant) and three luxury hotels in Colombo, Negombo and the Eastern city of Batticaloa.<sup>297</sup> It is estimated that over 350 people died.<sup>298</sup>

Since the bombings, there has been a continuation of anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka at the hands of ultra-nationalistic Sinhalese Buddhist groups.<sup>299</sup> Sri Lankan Muslims have faced an upsurge in violations of their basic rights as well as assaults and other abuse.<sup>300</sup> In particular, anti-Islamic sentiment, and suspicion of Muslims, has escalated to retaliatory violence.<sup>301</sup> It was reported that in the days following the attacks, mobs of young men began door-to-door evictions of Muslim refugees and asylum-seekers residing in the Negombo area.<sup>302</sup>

The Prevention of Terrorism Act which has been used to detain Tamils suspected of holding links to the LTTE,<sup>303</sup> has since the Easter bombings been used to arbitrarily arrest and detain hundreds of Sri Lankan Muslims.<sup>304</sup> Some had been arrested for little more than possessing the Quran or other Arabic literature.<sup>305</sup> Sri Lankan officials and politicians are being called upon to stop endorsing, ignoring, or exploiting hate speech and mob violence that has been directed at Muslims by members of the Buddhist clergy and other powerful figures.

The religious nationalism that has arguably led leaders to act in this way has meant religious minority communities suffer. There is an atmosphere of impunity where a Buddhist national identity prevails, and other faith groups suffer at the hands of extremists.

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<sup>295</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sri-lanka/#people-and-society>

<sup>296</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/sri-lanka-attacks-front-wounds-190422110652434.html>

<sup>297</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/10/fear-returns-sri-lanka-after-bombings>

<sup>298</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/main-suspect-behind-sri-lanka-easter-churches-deaths-arrested/>

<sup>299</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/sri-lanka>

<sup>300</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/sri-lanka-nationwide-curfew-crowds-attack-mosques-190513144625670.html>

<sup>301</sup> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2019/05/15/press/4336/article.htm>

<sup>302</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/sri-lanka-refugees-living-fear-following-easter-sunday-attacks>

<sup>303</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/sri-lanka/report-sri-lanka/>

<sup>304</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/04/sri-lanka-muslims-face-threats-attacks>

<sup>305</sup> *ibid*

While the reporting of violations against Hindus is less forthcoming, the community has also faced violations. This was highlighted in the acquittal of 12 members of Sri Lanka's Special Taskforce Police and one policeman in July 2019 for the execution of five ethnic Tamil students (known as the "Trinco Five") in January 2006.<sup>306</sup>

The Easter church bombings of 2019 have somewhat paved the way for increased discrimination for religious minority communities. The challenges Sri Lanka has faced in trying to unify its diverse ethno-religious population have become more uncertain.

On 25 January 2021 UN human rights experts urged the Sri Lankan Government to end its policy of forced cremation of the COVID-19 deceased, saying it ran contrary to the beliefs of Muslims and other minorities in the country, and could foment existing prejudices, intolerance and violence. "The imposition of cremation as the only option for handling the bodies confirmed or suspected of COVID-19 amounts to a human rights violation. There has been no established medical or scientific evidence in Sri Lanka or other countries that burial of dead bodies leads to increased risk of spreading communicable diseases such as COVID-19," they said.<sup>307</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/sri-lanka/>

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<sup>306</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/08/sri-lanka-no-justice-trinco-5>

<sup>307</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26686&LangID=E>



# SUDAN

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population 45 million. Muslims 91 per cent; Christians 5.4 per cent.<sup>308</sup> Within this community, Christians of the Coptic, Greek, Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Church as well as Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventist, and a range of other Pentecostal and Evangelical churches are found.<sup>309</sup> There are also Buddhists, Hindus, Bahá'ís, followers of indigenous religions.

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Sudan's track record of human rights under Omar al-Bashir, who was forced to step down in 2019, was appalling. Sunni interpretation of Islamic *sharia* was the source of law in the 2005 Constitution. As a result, religious minorities belonging to different faiths and Islamic sects were oppressed systematically. Different Christians were targeted including churches, properties, and businesses.<sup>310</sup> The regime was involved in serious human rights violations, routinely using live ammunition against unarmed protesters, detaining activists, and censorship.<sup>311</sup> A small Shi'a minority was also systematically discriminated and harassed by the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS).<sup>312</sup>

However, Sudan witnessed a huge breakthrough when al-Bashir was forced to step down and replaced by a military council.<sup>313</sup> In August 2019 civilian and military leadership signed the Draft Constitutional Charter that included several provisions protecting the right to freedom of religious belief and worship "in accordance with the requirements of the law and public order." It made no reference to *sharia* as a source of law.<sup>314</sup>

On 12 July 2020, Sudan abolished the apostasy law, public flogging and alcohol ban for non-Muslims. "We [will] drop all the laws violating the human rights in Sudan," Justice Minister Nasredeen Abdulbari said.<sup>315</sup>

<sup>308</sup> P81 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>309</sup> Dorjee, Tenzin. et al., 2019 Annual Report and Recommendations for World's Most Egregious Violators or Religious Freedom, USCIRF, 9 November 2020, page 99, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

<sup>310</sup> P81 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>311</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/sudan#4d98a8>

<sup>312</sup> P81 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>313</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/sudan#4d98a8>

<sup>314</sup> P81 [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report\\_Final\\_42920.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf)

<sup>315</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53379733>

Then in September 2020 Sudan's transitional government agreed a deal with rebel groups which ended 30 years of rule under Islamic law and Islam as the official state religion. "The state shall not establish an official religion," says the agreement. "No citizen shall be discriminated against based on their religion. For Sudan to become a democratic country where the rights of all citizens are enshrined, the constitution should be based on the principle of 'separation of religion and state', in the absence of which the right to self-determination must be respected."<sup>316</sup> There was an agreement to form an independent national commission for freedom of religion or belief and a Ministry for Peace and Human Rights.<sup>317</sup>

Islamist clerics took to social media to denounce the proposals; changing a constitution is easier than changing a cultural mind-set. Christians will continue to experience pressure from society to give up their faith. So, despite some improvements, as when a court found eight church leaders innocent of charges that have hung over them for three years, some religious groups still have concerns and are yet to benefit from these changes.

There have been cases of discrimination and violence against Christians. On 6 June 2020, a local imam asked his followers to 'cleanse' Muslim land from Christians. The resulting violence left several Christians injured.<sup>318</sup> On 20 June one South Sudanese Christian was killed and four seriously injured in another attack. when a mob attacked in the Shagla area of Omdurman, west of Khartoum, on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2020. A church building under construction was set on fire in August 2020; it had previously been attacked by extremists four times between December 2019 and January 2020.<sup>319</sup>

Despite the abolition of apostasy law, a group of NGOs say that the changes will be ineffective until and unless grassroot groups particularly, women are involved in the decision-making process.<sup>320</sup> Open Doors has called on the international community to invest in programmes that empower minority faith adherents, especially minority faith leaders, training them to understand their rights and how they can contribute to the building of the new Sudan.<sup>321</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/sudan/>

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<sup>316</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200907-sudan-separates-religion-from-state-ending-30-years-of-islamic-rule/>

<sup>317</sup> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/05/22/press/4673/article.htm>

<sup>318</sup> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/06/29/press/4702/article.htm>

<sup>319</sup> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/09/09/press/4790/article.htm>

<sup>320</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2020/08/ngos-say-changes-to-sudans-islamic-laws-dont-go-far-enough/>

<sup>321</sup> [https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?\\_ga=2.77701780.1449146661.1611142015-547195203.1610233542](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?_ga=2.77701780.1449146661.1611142015-547195203.1610233542)

# TURKEY

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Of a total population of 82 million the government indicates that 99 per cent of the population is Muslim, mostly Hanafi Sunni. There are significant minorities of Alevis and Shi'as. There are small communities of various Christian groups, mainly Orthodox, also Jews and Bahá'ís. A January 2019 survey suggested 3 per cent of the population self-identified as atheist and 2 per cent as nonbelievers.<sup>322</sup>

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Turkey's long-standing freedom of religion or belief problems impact groups and individuals from diverse religious or belief backgrounds as well as atheists and agnostics.<sup>323</sup> The deterioration of human rights protection in recent years, "as restrictive government and judicial actions have progressively affected large strata of society",<sup>324</sup> resulted in no steps being taken to rectify the situation and an increased vulnerability of religious or belief groups.

In Turkey no religious or belief community has legal personality, per se.<sup>325</sup> This affects all religious or belief communities in the exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief in its collective dimension.<sup>326</sup> The non-Muslim community foundations' right to elect new board members has been obstructed since 2013 causing these communities' right to association to be practically suspended.<sup>327</sup>

Despite the Turkish Constitutional Court's ruling<sup>328</sup> that the Government has violated Article 24 of the Turkish Constitution protecting freedom of religion and conscience by interfering in the internal affairs of the Armenian community, the Government still intervened in the election process of the 85th Patriarch of the Armenian community.<sup>329</sup>

Turkey is yet to effectively enforce numerous European Court of Human Rights judgments and take general measures to prevent similar violations from occurring; measures must be taken to ensure that the education system respects the right of parents to raise their children in line with their religious or philosophical views (this impacts, among others, Alevis, atheist and agnostics, Sunni Muslims critical of school teaching on religion), the right to conscientious objection to military service must be recognized, places of worship must be able to acquire legal status without discrimination (among others, Alevi cem houses, Protestant churches

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<sup>322</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkey/>

<sup>323</sup> For a comprehensive Report see "Pursuing Rights and Equality: Monitoring Report on the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey", Norwegian Helsinki Committee Freedom of Belief Initiative, 2019.

<sup>324</sup> Statement by Human Right Commissioner of the Council of Europe, Human rights in Turkey – the urgent need for a new beginning, 10 March 2017.

<sup>325</sup> Venice Commission CDL-AD(2010)005 Opinion on the Legal Status of Religious Communities in Turkey and the Right of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul to use the adjective "Ecumenical" (Venice, 12-13 March 2010), 15 March 2010.

<sup>326</sup> Mine Yıldırım, *The Collective Dimension of Freedom of Religion – the Case of Turkey*, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>327</sup> "Pursuing Rights and Equality: Monitoring Report on the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey", Norwegian Helsinki Committee Freedom of Belief Initiative, 2019.

<sup>328</sup> Turkish Constitutional Court (Plenary), Levon Berç Kuzukoğlu and Ohannes Garbis Balmumciyan, Application No. 2014/17354, 22 May 2019.

<sup>329</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2556](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2556)

and Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Halls); the religious identification on national ID cards must be removed and discrimination against the Alevi community in the provision of religious services needs to be corrected.<sup>330</sup>

Religious and ethnic groups – in particular Jews, Armenians, Christians and Greeks – continue to be targeted with hate speech in the media.<sup>331</sup>

The Government has taken measures – albeit late – to restore Armenian Surp Giragos Church in Diyarbakır, however the restoration has not been completed and the Armenian community still does not have access to the church.<sup>332</sup>

Many Muslims have welcomed the conversions of the Hagia Sophia and the Chora museums into mosques. However, many Christians and others have viewed the conversions as actions attempting to erase the Christian and secular heritage of the country and the reflection and continuation of a “conquest” mentality that is not compatible with equality of all.

The strong religious nationalism in society puts a lot of pressure on Christians – it is widely believed that a true Turk must be a Sunni Muslim. Christians from Muslim backgrounds often hide their faith. If they are discovered, they will face pressure from their families. Leaving Islam is seen as a betrayal of their Turkish identity and a source of shame to the family. They may be threatened with divorce and the loss of inheritance rights.<sup>333</sup>

In 2020, dozens of foreign Christians in Turkey were forced to leave the country or banned from returning in what appears to be government targeting of the Protestant Christian community.<sup>334</sup>

APPG for International Freedom of Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/turkey/>

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<sup>330</sup> Zengin group of cases v. Turkey, Sinan Işık v. Turkey, Buldu and Others v. Turkey, Jehovah's Witnesses Association v. Turkey, and Izzettin Dogan and Others v. Turkey.

<sup>331</sup> See weekly monitoring reports of the Hrant Dink Foundation <https://hrantdink.org/en/asulis-en/activities/projects/media-watch-on-hate-speech>

<sup>332</sup> Supra, 326.

<sup>333</sup> [https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?\\_ga=2.64197679.1475676765.1613559336-547195203.1610233542](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?_ga=2.64197679.1475676765.1613559336-547195203.1610233542)

<sup>334</sup> <https://morningstarnews.org/2020/08/turkey-deporting-foreign-christians-or-banning-their-return-sources-say/>

## TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan has over 5 million people,<sup>335</sup> and serious systemic violations of many human rights take place.<sup>336</sup> All exercise of freedom of religion or belief with others without state permission is illegal, with severe restrictions on permitted belief communities.<sup>337</sup>

Muslims are afraid to visibly fast and mark Ramadan, and Muslim young men are afraid to grow beards as police often target bearded men. One Muslim stopped going to mosque after police asked: “Who is more important, Allah or the President?”<sup>338</sup> Known Muslim prisoners of conscience include a large group of Muslims who met in Turkmenabad in 2013 to study Islam and were subsequently arrested and jailed. It is unknown whether any are still alive;<sup>339</sup> five Muslims who in 2017 met in Balkan Region with others to pray and study their faith using the works of theologian Said Nursi, and were jailed for 12 years each. Four of the five are in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death;<sup>340</sup> Annamurad Atdaev, given a 15-year strict regime prison term in 2016 for refusing to become an informer for the MSS secret police.<sup>341</sup>

As of January 2021, ten Jehovah’s Witness conscientious objectors to compulsory military service are known to be currently detained or serving labour camp terms of between one and four years. In the latest such known jailing, on 3 September 18-year-old Myrat Orazgeldiyev was jailed for one year.<sup>342</sup> Like all 24 conscientious objectors jailed since January 2018, he had offered to do alternative civilian service but Turkmenistan has rejected repeated UN calls to introduce this. Eight are in Seydi Labour Camp, where conditions are described as “inhuman.”<sup>343</sup>

Prison administrations must regularly inform higher authorities, such as the Prosecutor’s Office and the Interior Ministry, of the number of jailed: “adherents of banned religious organisations” (all exercise of freedom of religion and belief by groups of people without state permission is banned, this category could be very wide); alleged “Wahhabis”; “Jehovists”; and “Suleimanists” (an apparent reference to followers of Turkish-influenced Islam).<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Forum 18’s reports on particular freedom of religion and belief violations in Turkmenistan are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=32> and Forum 18’s January 2017 Turkmenistan religious freedom survey is at [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

<sup>336</sup> <https://www.freedomhouse.org/country/turkmenistan/freedom-world/2020>

<sup>337</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

<sup>338</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2481](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2481)

<sup>339</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

<sup>340</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2399](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2399)

<sup>341</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2318](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318)

<sup>342</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2600](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2600)

<sup>343</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2628](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2628)

<sup>344</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2476](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2476)

Some prisons (except Ovadan-Depe strict regime prison) have a mosque and a small Russian Orthodox prayer room. No Russian Orthodox priests are known to visit prisons, but state-approved imams do. “They call on prisoners to be calm and not to cause trouble, and praise the President”, a former prisoner of conscience stated. “No prisoner would reveal anything to them, just attend prayers”. Prisoners at Bayramaly (MR-K/16) strict regime labour camp state that the state-appointed imam is unable to answer questions about Islam. Some prisoners were sent to a punishment cell after the imam reported them for questioning his Islamic knowledge.<sup>345</sup>

Other freedom of religion and belief violations<sup>346</sup> include police in Dashoguz raiding two Protestant home meetings in February 2020, with the host being fined and threatened with having grandchildren taken away and other participants with being made unemployed. Another in Lebap Region was similarly fined for hosting a Christmas celebration. Also, officials in Lebap Region banned state employees from attending Friday prayers in mosques.<sup>347</sup>

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<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/turkmenistan/>

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<sup>345</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2483](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2483)

<sup>346</sup> <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=22>

<sup>347</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2555](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2555)

## UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan has 32 million people, with over 80 per cent seen as having a Muslim background.<sup>348</sup> Systemic violations of many human rights continue.<sup>349</sup> All exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission remains illegal.<sup>350</sup> The regime directly controls all public expression of Islam through the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims,<sup>351</sup> and manifestations of Shi'a Islam are forbidden.<sup>352</sup>

Serious violations of freedom of religion and belief continue,<sup>353</sup> including Muslims being jailed for discussing their faith online. On 14 August five were jailed, three given restricted freedom sentences. The mother of one stated that “the young men did not even know each other well. Most of them met for the first time on social media where they were asking questions about Islam”.<sup>354</sup> As in other recent cases where Muslims have been jailed for their beliefs, police used an agent provocateur to provide false evidence and the men were tortured,<sup>355</sup> yet despite binding legal international human rights obligations<sup>356</sup> no arrests or trials of suspect torturers will happen as according to one official “all the actions of the investigators were lawful”.<sup>357</sup>

On 31 March, a surgeon, Dr Alimardon Sultonov, known for discussing the lack of freedom of religion and belief for Muslims, had called the local medical emergency service to ask about COVID-19 cases. This prompted five officials to arrive to question him, confiscate a computer with religious texts, and open a criminal case against him. Among the charges he faces is a new Criminal Code Article 244-5 (“Dissemination of knowingly false information about an infectious disease”).<sup>358</sup>

In May 2018, new restrictive requirements were added to the Religion Law for seeking state permission to exist.<sup>359</sup> In 2020 Shi'a Muslim, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant religious communities all had applications to exist refused. Often the excuse is the refusal of local authorities to provide documents as part of the complex, time-consuming and expensive application process. In some cases registration applications have led to reprisals, such as police demands that Protestant Christians renounce their faith.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Forum 18's reports on particular freedom of religion and belief violations in Uzbekistan are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33> and Forum 18's September 2017 religious freedom survey is at [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2314](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

<sup>349</sup> <https://www.freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/freedom-world/2020>

<sup>350</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/uzbekistan/>

<sup>351</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2314](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

<sup>352</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2626](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2626)

<sup>353</sup> <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33>

<sup>354</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2599](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2599)

<sup>355</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2575](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2575)

<sup>356</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2374](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2374)

<sup>357</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2586](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2586)

<sup>358</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2614](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2614)

<sup>359</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2396](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2396)

<sup>360</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2622](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2622)

The challenges faced by the small minority of Christians with a Muslim background have been underlined by the COVID-19 crisis. The only Christian family in one area already faced continual oppression from their relatives and neighbours; the father was unable to find work because of the obstacles put in place, then the family was refused aid from the village authorities' distribution because of their Christian faith.<sup>361</sup>

On 28 April 2020, USCIRF 'upgraded' Uzbekistan to its Special Watch List (SWL) "in recognition of the progress made, and, crucially, in expectation of continued reform in the year ahead." They also noted that "although notable progress has been made, much remains to be done."<sup>362</sup>

On 13 October the regime was elected to the UN Human Rights Council<sup>363</sup> despite failing to implement recommendations from: UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed; its last UN Universal Periodic Review in 2018; and May 2020 Concluding Observations of the UN Human Rights Committee.<sup>364</sup>

An October 2020 Venice Commission / OSCE ODIHR opinion on a draft new Religion Law<sup>365</sup> described it as "incompatible with international human rights standards;" another commentator stated "if Uzbekistan misses this last reform opportunity and passes a flawed religion law, life will remain difficult for non-threatening religious groups while any security gains will be a mirage."<sup>366</sup> Officials have not explained why a draft which they knew seriously failed to implement human rights was sent for review.<sup>367</sup> One Muslim noted that: "The draft Law is only an advertisement for Uzbekistan aimed at international organisations and foreign states. If the authorities wanted real freedom for the people, then the draft Law would have been very different."<sup>368</sup>

APPG for International Freedom or Belief Country page:

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/uzbekistan/>

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<sup>361</sup> <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/coronavirus-asia/>

<sup>362</sup> <https://thediomat.com/2020/07/uzbekistan-must-stay-on-the-path-of-religious-freedom-reform/>

<sup>363</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/17/reality-check-human-rights-uzbekistan>

<sup>364</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2609](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2609)

<sup>365</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/467682>

<sup>366</sup> Knox Thames, <https://thediomat.com/2020/10/a-real-opportunity-for-religion-law-reform-in-uzbekistan/>

<sup>367</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2604](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2604)

<sup>368</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2609](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2609)



# YEMEN

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Total population 30 million. The U.S. government estimates 55 per cent of the population to be Sunni and 45 percent Zaydi. Jews, Bahá'ís, Hindus, and Christians, many of whom are refugees or temporary foreign residents, comprise less than 1 percent of the population. Christian groups include Roman Catholics and Anglicans.<sup>369</sup>

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The 2020 FCO report asserted that “Freedom of religion or belief was widely denied in 2019,”<sup>370</sup> further noting that the Bahá'í minority was the most “visibly persecuted”.<sup>371</sup> 2020 has seen significant developments in the situation of the Bahá'í community but other religious minorities have also faced repression.

In July 2020 the World Jewish Congress reported that Houthi authorities had arrested and imprisoned Yemeni Jews.<sup>372</sup> A news article dated 21 August 2020, claimed that the Houthis “have recently ordered some of the country's few remaining Jews to leave the country...”<sup>373</sup>

According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) the Yemeni Christian community once numbered 41,000.<sup>374</sup> This report estimates that by 2020 this has shrunk to “a few thousand”, and in recent years Christians have faced arrest and detention and confiscation of religious materials.<sup>375</sup>

Houthi authorities have referred to certain Sunni groups as “takfiri” (those who declare other Muslims as apostates) and have labelled some Sunnis as “spies” or “collaborators” with the Saudi-led coalition.<sup>376</sup>

In March 2020 Amnesty International reported that a Houthi court had confirmed the death sentence in the case of Hamid bin Haydara, a Bahá'í imprisoned since 2013 and subject to torture and forced confession.<sup>377</sup> Five other Bahá'ís were also imprisoned in Sana'a.

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<sup>369</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/yemen/>

<sup>370</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2019 Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report 16 July 2020 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2019/human-rights-and-democracy-the-2019-foreign-and-commonwealth-office-report#chapter-4-human-rights-priority-countries>

<sup>371</sup> Ibid;

<sup>372</sup> World Jewish Congress 14th July 2020, “Reports of Houthi Rebels Imprisoning Yemeni Jews Must Be Investigated as Anti-Semitism” - <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/reports-of-houthi-rebels-imprisoning-yemeni-jews-must-be-investigated-as-antisemitism-7-2-2020>

<sup>373</sup> Israel Hayom News 21st August 2020 “ Houthis Are Forcing Out Yemen’s Last Remaining Jews” - <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/08/21/houthis-are-forcing-out-yemens-last-remaining-jews/>

<sup>374</sup> USCIRF, Country Update: Yemen – June 2020 - <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Yemen%20Country%20Update.pdf>

<sup>375</sup> Ibid;

<sup>376</sup> Ibid;

<sup>377</sup> Amnesty International “Huthi-run Court upholds death sentence against Baha'i prisoner of conscience, 23 March 2020 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/yemen-huthirun-court-upholds-death-sentence-against-bahai-prisoner-of-conscience/>

On 30 July the Bahá'í International Community confirmed that all six Bahá'í prisoners had been released.<sup>378</sup> The Houthi President had ordered their release in March 2020, but these were not expedited until July. After their release, the six Bahá'ís were effectively exiled from the country. In August media reported on a further court hearing in Sana'a where the deported Bahá'ís were declared to be “fugitives” and demanded that they attend further court hearings.<sup>379</sup>

The 45th session of the UN Human Rights Council adopted two resolutions on Yemen, (A/HRC/45/L.25) and (A/HRC/45/L.51), the latter making reference to freedom of religion or belief. The UK was not a voting member, but in addition to lobbying in support of these resolutions, the UK made specific reference to Yemen's Bahá'ís during the discussion with the Group of Eminent Experts on 29 September 2020, stating: “We are particularly concerned by the persecution of members of minorities including the Bahá'ís in Houthi areas [...]”<sup>380</sup>

The people of Yemen continue to face war, famine, and disease. Human rights violations are being perpetrated in many areas, including abuses of freedom of religion or belief and this can manifest as discrimination or even persecution against Muslims, Christians, Jews and Bahá'ís.

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<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/yemen/>

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<sup>378</sup> Bahá'í World News Service, “Six Bahá'ís Imprisoned by the Houthis freed in Yemen”, 30 July 2020 - <https://news.bahai.org/story/1443/>

<sup>379</sup> The National News “Yemen: Houthis Demand return of ‘fugitive’ Baha'is they deported” 30 August 2020 - <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/yemen-houthis-demand-return-of-fugitive-bahais-they-deported-1.1070362>

<sup>380</sup> Gov.uk UN Human Rights Council 45: Interactive Dialogue with the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, Ambassador Rita French 29 September 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-45-interactive-dialogue-with-the-group-of-eminent-experts-on-yemen>