



ARTICLE

The coronavirus pandemic is testing international religious freedom commitments

BY AARON MERCER

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Last month the coronavirus pandemic became a stark reality for Americans. Our normal routines disappeared seemingly overnight, including church activities. Calls for “social distancing” suddenly precluded most gatherings, including those in houses of worship.

We are not alone. Governments around the world are seeking to contain the spread of the highly contagious virus by placing dramatic restrictions on travel and assembly. Religious groups are not exempt.

Should we be worried about religious freedom that we cherish at home and seek to advance abroad?

At home—not yet. Russell Moore recently made a strong case (<https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/does-it-violate-religious-liberty-to-close-churches-over-coronavirus>) that generally applicable public health directives are not religious liberty violations. “The current situation facing us is not a case of the state overstepping its bounds, but rather seeking to carry out its legitimate God-given authority,” he wrote.

Abroad—well, that depends.

A test for societies

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released a report last month exploring international law that guides deliberations at the intersection of public health and human rights. The commission concluded (<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Factsheet%20Covid-19%20and%20FoRB.pdf>) that religious freedom should be remembered by governments “for reasons of both legality and policy effectiveness.”

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are widely accepted in the global community. Both guarantee freedom of religion or belief. Curtailment of that liberty is

permissible in public health emergencies, but only in ways that do not destroy the right, are narrow in application, and are not discriminatory against certain sets of believers.

Quoting United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, USCIRF argues that pandemic countermeasures should be limited to those “necessary and proportionate to the evaluated risk.” Bachelet, a former president of Chile and public health professional, called this time a “test” for countries—one in which “human dignity and rights need to be front and center . . . not an afterthought.”

Troubling trends

Some nations are rising to the challenge of Bachelet’s test better than others.

China, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, is already a well-known persecutor of many faiths in the name of “sinicization.” According to groups like Voice of the Martyrs and China Aid, the pandemic has only given Communist authorities new cover to harass house church leaders and to demolish houses of worship. Shadong Province has even forbidden online preaching (<https://www.foxnews.com/world/coronavirus-china-update-christian-persecution-vom>).

There are also reports that China has relocated many of the million-plus Uyghur Muslims detained in concentration camps to factories around the country in order to make up for work lost during quarantines. USCIRF Vice Chair Nadine Maenza states (

china-use-slave-labor-to-keep-factories-open-during-coronavirus), “If these reports are accurate, it means that the Chinese government is trafficking in the slave labor of religious minorities.”

China is not the only one to get tough reviews. USCIRF also criticizes South Korea, a democratic ally of the United States, for vilification of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus after the virus was found rapidly spreading among the fringe sect’s adherents. According to the commission, local prosecutors are even investigating the leader of the group—considered a secretive cult (<https://www.christianpost.com/news/south-korean-cult-church-blamed-for-covid-19-says-members-are-being-persecuted-killed.html>) by many church leaders—for murder by “willful negligence.” USCIRF does note, however, that South Korea’s vice minister of health publicly declared the cooperation of the group in efforts to contain the outbreak.

India, the world’s largest democracy, is also seeing its already intense religious persecution (<https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/are-u-s-india-relations-good-for-religious-freedom>) problem against Muslims, Christians, and others being exacerbated during the coronavirus lockdown. While protests in Delhi may have been dispersed in response to the pandemic, TIME reports that the inflammatory hashtag #CoronaJihad (<https://time.com/5815264/coronavirus-india-islamophobia-coronajihad/>) has been used hundreds of thousands of times by Hindu extremists on Twitter since March 28.

Meanwhile, India’s longtime foe, Pakistan, has also been flagged (<https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases-statements/uscirf-troubled-targeting-hazara-shi-in-pakistan-amid>) for allowing religious minorities to be

blamed for the coronavirus. The Sunni Muslim majority in one province is reportedly clamping down on a Shia minority community and referring to the pandemic as the “Shia virus.”

Opportunities in openness

While scapegoating and outright persecution are on the rise in numerous places around the world, there are also opportunities for freedom to advance.

Iran is a far cry from a religious liberty hero. However, in a recent press conference, U.S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback said the rapid spread of the coronavirus there has led Iranian authorities to furlough some 100,000 prisoners of conscience. More remain, but it is a development to build on.

<https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-ambassador-at-large-for-international-religious-freedom-sam-brownback-on-covid-19-impact-on-religious-minorities/> an “encouraging trend” of new openness in several countries to religious groups. He said it stems from a growing recognition that we’re all in this struggle together. And respect for the faithful is not just properly principled, but practical. The ambassador declared, “A lot of times in developing countries the religious community is the most organized in the place to be able to distribute information and assistance, and we need to work through these communities.”

Reflecting on roles of the church and state in combating the coronavirus scourge domestically, Moore similarly called for a “team” mentality to “avoid overreach on one side or paranoia on the other.”

May such a relationship of mutual respect truly bloom here and around the world. May we work together to overcome this pandemic and promote life for the good of all.

Aaron Mercer

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