

Foreword

Dr Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Dr Nazila Ghanea, Associate Professor of International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford

Sir Malcolm Evans, Professor of International Law at Bristol University

On 21 April 2019, almost 300 people were killed in a series of bombings in Sri Lanka, many of which were targeted at churches.¹ On 23 April 2019, the Saudi Arabian Government announced the mass execution of 37 men, at least 33 of whom are from the Shi'a Muslim minority.² In the Netherlands in 2017, the authorities recorded 432 incidents of hate crime against Jewish people.³ On 15 March 2019, 51 people were killed as they attended mosque for Friday prayers in Christchurch, New Zealand.⁴

These horrific examples demonstrate that from Sri Lanka to Saudi Arabia, from the Netherlands to New Zealand, violations of the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) are a truly global and growing phenomenon. Indeed, data suggests that 83% of the world's population live in countries with severe Governmental and/or societal restrictions on the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief.⁵

Studies that have monitored global trends over the past decade note that the number of countries that violate FoRB rights has been rising significantly. While Christians in 143 countries and Muslims in 140 countries were reportedly harassed in 2017, nearly all religious groups experienced sharp increases in the number of countries where they faced harassment over the preceding decade. For Buddhists and Jews the number rose by an alarming 90% and 71% respectively, while the comparable trend for Muslims between 2007 and 2017 was 46% and for Christians 35%.⁶ Violence resulting from contestation over religious beliefs targeting minorities and dissenters rose by 76% in this period.⁷ According to the 2018 Freedom of Thought Report, in 2017, there were 85 countries in which the non-religious experienced "Grave Violations" or "Severe Discrimination".⁸

Even some countries which have traditionally offered significant protection for FoRB are at present seeing sharp increases in FoRB violations, mostly driven by far-right nationalism. UN Special Rapporteur Shaheed's own report on antisemitism found that in France, reports of antisemitic acts

¹ BBC, *Sri Lanka attacks: Death toll soars to 290 after bombings hit churches and hotels*, 22 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-48008073>

² Human Rights Watch, *Saudi Arabia: Mass Execution of 37 Men*, 24 April 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/24/saudi-arabia-mass-execution-37-men>

³ OSCE, *Netherlands, Hate Crime Reporting*, <http://hatecrime.osce.org/netherlands>

⁴ Julia Hollingsworth, *Christchurch terror attack death toll increases to 51*, CNN, 2 May 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/02/asia/nz-christchurch-attack-death-toll-intl/index.html>

⁵ Pew Research Center, *Global Uptick in Government Restrictions on Religion in 2016*, 21 June 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/21/global-uptick-in-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2016/>

⁶ Pew Research Center, *A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World*, 15 July 2019, page 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, page 51

⁸ 'Editorial Introduction in *Freedom of Thought Report 2018*, Humanists International, 2018, <https://fot.humanists.international/editorial-introduction/>

had increased by 74% from 2017 to 2018, with such acts constituting half of all documented hate crimes and nearly 15% of the incidents involving physical violence.⁹

What we learn is that all of humanity has to face the challenge of increasing violations of FoRB, that there is not one type of victim or perpetrator, and that the scale and frequency of these attacks highlight the terrible danger that intolerance towards others and their beliefs poses to societies everywhere. The attacks suffered by victims in these contexts go far beyond violations to FoRB and stretch to violations of a wide range of human rights including the rights to life, liberty and security of person.

Despite the scale and severity of the problem, thus far political responses have been muted. There have, however, recently been positive moves which indicate that Governments are starting to take this issue more seriously, such as the US Ministerial on Religious Freedom, the growth in the number of dedicated ambassadors or special envoys for FoRB, the observance of 27 October as international FoRB day, and the designation by the United Nations General Assembly of 22 August as the international day to commemorate the victims of acts of violence based on their religion or belief.

We welcome these moves and advise that one of the most important ways of enhancing the efficacy of FoRB interventions is to ensure that they are inclusive. It is implausible that a legal and social framework of respect for the rights of any one religious or belief group can be cultivated in countries with high levels of FoRB violations without developing frameworks that support the rights of all.

Moreover, a focus on promoting FoRB on a selective basis can be counter-productive. This is because it can ostracise communities and feed into xenophobic narratives that question the loyalty of minority religious communities and provide populist Governments with a pretext to align themselves with specific religious groups and discriminate against others. Such favouritism is one of the major causes of FoRB violations in many countries that repress religious minorities. It can also undermine the legitimacy of international solidarity by giving the impression that such advocacy amounts to special pleading rather than a commitment to a universal human right. Therefore, as we wrote in our joint letter to the Sunday Telegraph on 10 February 2019:

"Seeking to protect some from persecution necessarily requires seeking to protect all from persecution. Upholding full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief (which includes the freedom of worship) would enhance its enjoyment by all, whether believer, non-believer or ambivalent. Britain can rightly draw attention to the inclusive nature of its diplomacy in advancing this freedom over many years. This is an opportunity for redoubling and reinforcing these efforts in the light of increasingly abhorrent violations."¹⁰

The report you are reading now has been designed to support the UK, and other actors, to contribute effectively to the growing international engagement to address FoRB violations. It was compiled by a range of prominent organisations from different religious and non-religious backgrounds and provides detailed analysis of the FoRB situation in 26 countries, the majority of

⁹ Dr Ahmed Shaheed, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (Focus: Combatting Antisemitism to Eliminate Discrimination and Intolerance Based on Religion or Belief)*, United Nations, 2019, <https://undocs.org/A/74/358>

¹⁰ Malcolm Evans, Nazila Ghanea and Ahmed Shaheed, *Letter to the Editor: Freedom of religion*, Sunday Telegraph, 10 February 2019, <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-sunday-telegraph/20190210/281960314006362>

which the FCO includes in its *'Human Rights and Democracy Report 2018'*. All the countries covered have been chosen in the light of the significant denials of FoRB that occur within their borders. As such, this report supports both Her Majesty's Government's prioritisation of FoRB and the FCO's desire to hone policy and action to ameliorate negative human rights situations in FCO 'Human Rights Priority Countries' (HRPCs).

As reliable, detailed information is vital to developing and implementing effective policies to promote FoRB, we encourage the UK Government to make use of this report. We also encourage the UK to adopt the recommendations the report outlines regarding making more use of the FCO's own excellent FoRB toolkit, as there is a significant lack of engagement with the toolkit across the FCO network. Making use of the toolkit and this excellent report will significantly support the UK Government's efforts to promote FoRB.

We commend this report to all those who serve in the UK government and elsewhere in defence of human rights.

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 FCO's FoRB Toolkit recognises that the primary action that Posts can take is to 'assess the situation regarding FoRB'.¹¹ 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 FCO can struggle to internally find the expertise essential for accurate assessments. The FCO FoRB Toolkit requires internal assessments to use non-FCO sources including 'the reports of civil society and other organisations,' which includes this APPG.¹² 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.

Thirty countries were listed as Human Rights Priority Countries (HRPCs) in the FCO Human Rights & Democracy report 2018, released in June 2019. The HRPC criteria is stated as:

1. The human rights situation in the country;
2. The country's human rights trajectory and
3. The UK's ability to influence change.

¹¹ 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

¹² Ibid. Para 37 and Annex 3

The 2014 FCO Human Rights and Democracy Report noted that “the first of these criteria” - gravity of the situation – “is the most important assessment that we make and is not affected by levels of UK interest or influence.”

It is on the basis of these criteria that the APPG, through its 25 stakeholder organisations, provides in the following pages 26 profiles of countries with significant FoRB violations. 21 countries marked as current FCO HRPCs have been chosen for this report. These countries are: **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, North Korea, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Yemen**. The APPG notes that the evidence strongly supports all these countries being designated as HRPCs.

Current non-HRPC countries included in this report, as they meet the HRPC criteria, are: **India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Nigeria and Turkey**. Countries which also meet the HRPC criteria but have not been included in this report due to lack of space include: **Azerbaijan, Malaysia, Nepal and Vietnam**.

The profiles included in this report complement the FCO 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.

In the Toolkit’s spirit of partnership, the APPG and its stakeholders provide this FoRB resource using accurate evidence-based monitoring and analysis of FoRB violations. We very much hope that a partnership allowing regular sharing of such information can flourish.

Recommendations

The APPG recommends:

1. That FCO posts further implement the FCO FoRB toolkit as a normal part of their work.
2. That the FCO in London continues to encourage, support and monitor posts’ implementation of the FCO FoRB toolkit’s recommendations.
3. That, building on the welcome appointment of a Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief by two successive Prime Ministers, this post be made a permanent role.
4. That the commitment that the International Roving Ambassador for Human Rights will work with the Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief is expressed in visible public activity at the United Nations, including the Human Rights Council, as well as elsewhere including with FCO posts worldwide.
5. That FCO posts actively engage with the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief by proactively seeking ways that they can concretely advance freedom of religion and belief in country, as well as monitoring the Special Envoy's work on social media.

Methodology

This report provides an overview of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) between November 2018 and November 2019. It uses secondary reporting based on primary field research by international civil society organisations and NGOs, reputable journalists and publications, as well as the reports of international institutions such as the United Nations, European Union and United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. The report does not aim to list each and every violation, but instead aims to give readers a sense of the most significant FoRB violations in the countries under study within the reporting period. At times, incidents outside of the reporting period are referenced so as to give wider context to the situation for religious and non-religious minorities residing in the country. The authors of this resource work for organisations focusing on FoRB issues in relevant countries and are in close contact with those working to promote FoRB in the field within their own organisations and in others.

Accuracy is of the utmost importance when monitoring and analysing FoRB and other human rights violations. The organisations quoted in this shadow report have many years of experience of confirming the accuracy or inaccuracy of claims of human rights violations. Their reputations have been built on ensuring the accuracy of the information they provide, thereby providing confidence that each of the country profiles in this shadow report is accurate.

A technical difficulty which should be noted when reading this report is that the nature of the subject means that it is often difficult to achieve regular reporting of violations in-country. Groups undergoing or at risk of FoRB violations often attempt to keep a low profile to avoid further targeting. This lack of reporting can often give the impression that violations against particular groups are non-existent. There is, however, a key difference between 'non-existent' and 'non-reportable'. Where reporting is difficult for security reasons, affecting victims and/or those working with them, this report seeks to shed light on the situation nevertheless. Often this will involve dealing with small and, at times, invisible religious communities. Because of these difficulties, a number of the profiles outline flaws in the legal and constitutional systems of the countries under study. From this outline, it can be deduced what the risks are for individuals practicing religions or beliefs that are illegal within a state and/or are not accepted by wider society. The information in the country profiles and the FoRB violations might also apply to communities which have not been named for security reasons.