



Commentary on the current state of Freedom of Religion or Belief

2018

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This report was published in November 2018.

This report has been written and produced by the stakeholder organisations and staff team of the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief. The country profiles were primarily written by Open Doors UK & Ireland, CSW, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the UK, Forum 18 and the Al-Khoei Foundation. Additional editing by WorldWatchMonitor.org.

The work of the APPG is also made possible by financial support from the APPG’s stakeholders, whose names can be found on the APPG’s website [here](#) or via: <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/stakeholders/>

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Foreword

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

Habiba Isyaku, a 14-year-old schoolgirl from a Christian community in Katsina State, Nigeria, had recently passed her Junior Secondary School certificate examination “with flying colours” and was entering senior secondary school. On 16 August 2016 Habiba was abducted; reports from the Christian Association of Nigeria indicate that she was subsequently forced to convert to Islam and obliged to marry her abductor. Habiba’s father has attempted to secure his daughter’s release by interceding with the Emir of Katsina, but was told, to his distress, that Habiba “converted voluntarily”.¹ Habiba remains with her abductor.²

The FCO’s *Freedom of Religion or Belief Toolkit* – an additional useful resource for Ministers and civil servants – outlines the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as defined by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This includes the right to change one’s religion or belief, adopt a new religion or belief (including non-theistic and atheistic beliefs), to practice one’s belief with other people without hindrance, and finally, to share those beliefs in peace and safety.

Habiba’s case demonstrates the inherent interconnectedness of every person’s right to FoRB with other fundamental human rights: freedom from slavery and sexual enslavement; freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; freedom from gender discrimination; and the rights of the child.

Habiba’s case is also just one among millions throughout the world. Globally, and in increasing numbers, Bahá’ís, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Humanists, Jews, Muslims and others suffer serious violations of their right to FoRB. The latest figures show that in 2016 83% of the world’s population lived in countries with high or very high religious restrictions (up from 79% in 2015).³ In my own reports as UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, I have observed that “*acts of intolerance in the name of freedom of religion or belief are prevalent globally.*”⁴

There is not just one type of perpetrator or victim. Groups that face persecution in one country may be the persecutors in others. Perpetrators may also be State or non-State actors, and from the latter, mob violence is frequently used to enforce religious or social norms. This information highlights the importance of considering FoRB violations and the means of reducing them when determining policy and action in domestic and foreign affairs.

Because of the scale and intensity of violations, FoRB has emerged as a critical issue of our time and is increasingly recognised as such. Countries including the UK, USA, Canada, Germany and Denmark have started to prioritise this in their work and the EU has created a new mandate on FoRB alongside the Special Rapporteur at the UN.

The UK shares obligations with the global community to defend FoRB and other linked freedoms, which are recognised by the UK as contributing to strengthening the rules-based international order. In a speech in January 2018 at the Pontifical Gregorian University, the FCO Minister of State for the

¹ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *Faith and A Future*, 2018, see p53, http://faithandafuture.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Faith_and_a_Future_HR.pdf

² Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *Faith and A Future*, 2018, see p53, http://faithandafuture.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Faith_and_a_Future_HR.pdf

³ Pew Forum, *Global Uptick in Government Restrictions on Religion*, <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/21/global-uptick-in-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2016/>

⁴ Shaheed, A., *Interim Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief*, United Nations, August, 2017, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/270/09/PDF/N1727009.pdf>

UN and Commonwealth, and recently appointed Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on FoRB, Lord Ahmad stated:

“The connection between religious tolerance and stable societies is another reason why we think promoting freedom of religion or belief is so important. There is clear evidence to suggest that tolerant and inclusive societies are better equipped to resist extremism. And most importantly, by ensuring that everyone can contribute, it makes society as a whole better.”⁵

In her 2017 Christmas message, the Prime Minister called us to ‘remember those around the world today who have been denied their freedoms – from Christians in some parts of the Middle East to the sickening persecution of the Rohingya Muslims.’ She also reaffirmed HMG’s ‘determination to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to speak about and practice their beliefs in peace and safety’.⁶

This report highlights 27 countries, the majority of which the FCO includes in its **‘Human Rights and Democracy Report 2017’**, released in July 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).

The following pages will explore instances of the denial of freedom and abuses of rights, and the targeting of individuals and entire communities in respect of their religion or belief. It is important to note that those working in this field and those affected by FoRB violations regard their systems of belief as vehicles for individual and collective growth. They know that personal and collective beliefs challenge us and call us to serve and care for others, wherever they be within the personal or global human family. There is growing recognition that FoRB is significant for achieving the UK’s policy and strategic goals of building sustainable peace and a bulwark against injustice.

I wholeheartedly endorse this report and commend it to all those who serve in the UK government and elsewhere in defence of human rights.

Introduction

In July 2018 the Prime Minister appointed Lord Ahmad as Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Since then, advancing the right to FoRB and tackling FoRB related violations has been confirmed as a priority of Her Majesty’s Government.

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 action that Posts can do is to ‘assess the situation regarding FoRB’.⁷ 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 recourse action.

⁵ Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Speech to Pontifical Gregorian University, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, January 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/lord-ahmad-speech-why-it-matters-to-be-intolerant-of-intolerance>

⁶ Prime Minister Theresa May’s Christmas Message 2017, 24 Dec. 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-theresa-mays-christmas-message-2017>

⁷ Foreign and Commonwealth Office Toolkit, Para 37

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/561516/Freedom_of_Religion_or_Belief_Toolkit_-_2016.pdf

Accurately monitoring and analysing FoRB violations demands expertise in both FoRB and country contexts. 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 accurate assessments to use non-FCO sources including 'the reports of civil society and other organisations,' which includes this APPG.⁸ 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 further harmed by public comment on their situation.

Thirty countries were listed as Human Rights Priority Countries (HRPCs) in the FCO Human Rights & Democracy report 2017, released in July 2018.

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.

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, provide in the following pages 27 profiles of countries with significant FoRB violations. 21 countries marked as current FCO HRPCs have been chosen for this report. These countries are: **Afghanistan, People's Republic of Bangladesh, Burma, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Republic of Maldives, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, 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, Turkey, and Vietnam.** 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 Sri Lanka.**

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.

⁸ Ibid. para 37 and Annex 3

Recommendations

The APPG recommends:

- That the FCO ensure that its country Desk Officers in Whitehall and its Embassy and High Commission staff are trained and equipped to assess, prevent and practically respond to religious/belief dynamics and subsequent FoRB violations in the 27 countries named in this report.
- That, when preparing the annual Human Rights and Democracy Report, the Human Rights and Democracy Department in the FCO in London formally incorporates a civil society evidence submission process into the report writing process.
- That the FCO disseminates this complementary APPG report to all London-based desk officers and UK embassies and missions (including multilateral organisation missions) covering the 31 countries named⁹ in this shadow report.
- That the FCO implements the FoRB Toolkit's recommendation to provide accurate monitoring and analysis by using the publicly-accessible civic society FoRB sources noted in the Toolkit and this shadow report in preparing internal assessments and the Human Rights & Democracy annual reports.

⁹ Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Burma, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Egypt, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Republic of Maldives, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen. Azerbaijan, Malaysia, Nepal and Sri Lanka do not have country profiles in this report but are still countries of concern for the APPG FoRB and its stakeholder organisations.

Methodology

This report provides an overview of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) between November 2017 and November 2018, summarising primary field research by international civil society organisations. 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 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 are 'discovered'. The information in the country profiles and the FoRB violations might also apply to communities which have not been named for security reasons. At times, incidents outside of the reporting period are referenced so as to give the wider context of FoRB violations in the country.

Afghanistan

84.7% of Afghanistan's population is Sunni Muslim with a sizeable Shia (Imami and Ismaili) minority (10-15%).¹⁰ There are also small Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities.¹¹ The indigenous Christian community remains invariably out of sight,¹² while the Sikh and Hindu community are more visible but still at risk of extreme discrimination.¹³

With growing areas of Afghan territory either contested or under Taliban control¹⁴ and with the emergence of Daesh in the country, human rights abuses are a familiar story. Within the wider plethora of abuses, the international right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is consistently undermined. In Afghanistan's constitution it is the first chapter 'The State' that affirms religious freedom, not the chapter on 'Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens'. It permits followers of non-Sunni Islam religions to exercise their faith within the limits of the provision of the law, but there is no legal provision empowering religious or belief minorities to openly practice their beliefs. These minorities therefore remain vulnerable to persecution from fellow citizens and the State alike.¹⁵

Conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy, which is punishable by confiscation of property, imprisonment or even death, as is any conviction on blasphemy charges.¹⁶ Accusations of apostasy and blasphemy are frequently used to harass religious minorities; there have been reports of converts admitted to psychiatric hospitals and others, murdered by family members¹⁷ or executed by the state.¹⁸

During the reporting period of this document, there were a number of attacks against Shia Muslims with heavy casualties and high death tolls. In December 2017 Daesh claimed responsibility for two bomb attacks targeting Shia Muslims as they attended places of worship. These attacks, in Kabul and Herat, resulted in 133 civilian casualties, 46 of which were deaths.¹⁹ A violent attack in March 2018 (also claimed by Daesh) resulted in the deaths of at least nine people in an area of Kabul regularly frequented by Hazaras (an ethnic grouping who are predominantly Shia Muslim).²⁰

While specific violations against Christians are rarely reported because of security issues and Afghanistan's Christian population tends to keep as low a profile as possible, killings of converts do continue.²¹ This lack of reporting has tended to give the impression that violence against Christians is not taking place in Afghanistan, at times leading to a misunderstanding that it is safe to return Christian converts to the country. Amnesty International's 2017 report underscored this issue by highlighting the story of Christian convert Farid. Although he had been attacked by family members when he had attempted to move back to Afghanistan 10 years previously, he was told that it was safe for him to return again.²²

¹⁰ CIA World Factbook. 'Afghanistan' and Minority Rights Group, 'Afghanistan', July 2018.

¹¹ Minority Rights Group, 'Afghanistan', July 2018.

¹² An expatriate Christian community, mostly comprising of diplomats and member of international security forces, are visible in Kabul and are able to associate for worship within highly secured diplomatic zones. Non-expatriate Afghan citizens are not able to live their faith openly, neither alone nor in community and remain in hiding. See World Watch research, 'Afghanistan: country dossier', April 2018, p.8

¹³ Minority Rights Group, 'Afghanistan', July 2018.

¹⁴ Mashal, M., 'Why the Taliban's Assault on Ghazni matters'. The New York Times, 13 August 2018.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ USCIRF, 'Afghanistan 2017 International Religious Freedom Report'. 2017, p.1

¹⁷ World Watch Research, 'Afghanistan: country dossier', April 2018, p.8

¹⁸ Minority Rights Group, 'Afghanistan', July 2018.

¹⁹ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 'Afghanistan: Protection of civilians in armed conflict annual report 2017', February 2018, p.41.

²⁰ Minority Rights Group, 'Afghanistan', July 2018.

²¹ World Watch Research, 'Afghanistan: country dossier', April 2018, p.8

²² Amnesty International, 'Forced back to danger: asylum-seekers returned from Europe to Afghanistan'. 2017, p.14

Sikhs and Hindus also report pressure to convert from their faiths, and face disruption to funeral and cremation ceremonies by local officials. Sikhs living in Kabul experience social ostracism and economic hardship, with many non-Sikhs refusing to conduct business with them. 'Land grabbing' in areas where Sikhs have historically resided are also reported.²³ The dangers facing the Sikh community were further illustrated in July 2018 when a suicide bomber attacked a bus on its way through Jalalabad. Most of those killed were Sikhs on their way to meet President Ashraf Ghani.²⁴ Among those killed was the only Sikh candidate who had planned to contest the October 2018 parliamentary elections. Responsibility for this attack has since been claimed by Daesh.²⁵

Bangladesh

Bangladesh's population is approximately 89% Muslim, predominantly Sunni with some Shia and approximately 100,000 Ahmadis.²⁶ 10% of the population is Hindu; Christians and Buddhist make up less than 1% of the population.²⁷

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is under attack in Bangladesh and the space for religious freedom has continued to shrink. Religious minorities face systematic discrimination, humiliation and aggressive attacks that take place through both extrajudicial and legal means. Few violations of FoRB get reported due to the government's crackdown on the media, bloggers and civil society activists. The fear of persecution is so instilled that citizens are reluctant to express views on social media.²⁸

According to the Chairman of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Bangladeshi minorities have undergone a consistent process of denial of their rights, forcing many to leave their homeland.²⁹ The NHRC highlights that some communal violence is staged so as to threaten and drive out minorities from their land by 'land grabbers'. It is argued that since minorities have few resources to protect themselves, and because the government has paid little attention to their needs and protection, 'land grabbers' are taking advantage of official negligence.

Between 1964 and 2001 an estimated 8.1 million Hindus left Bangladesh. Continued discrimination, land grabbing and the growing threat of violence have meant that Bangladeshi Hindus have continued to emigrate, in many cases irregularly, to India.

More recently, Hindus have been targeted not only in intercommunal attacks but increasingly by extremist militants.³⁰ Within the Hindu community, the Dalit population remains especially marginalised and subject to discrimination not only by the majority population but also by more affluent, higher-caste Hindus who may, for example, exclude them from certain rituals and from shared spaces such as temples, restaurants and markets. Isolated in remote rural settlements or segregated in poorly serviced urban 'colonies', they face widespread poverty, ostracisation and food insecurity. Besides exclusion from many areas of employment, they have also been subjected to land

²³ Minority Rights Group, 'Afghanistan', July 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/afghanistan/>

²⁴ 'Afghanistan blast: Sikhs among 19 dead in Jalalabad suicide attack'. BBC News, 1 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44677823>

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ Minority Rights Group, 'Bangladesh' July 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/bangladesh/>

²⁷ CIA World fact book, 'Bangladesh', <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, 'We Don't Have Him', Aug. 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/06/we-dont-have-him/secret-detentions-and-enforced-disappearances-bangladesh> and <https://www.thedailystar.net/politics/news/minorities-bindu-bouddha-christian-fear-attacks-ahead-bangladesh-general-elections-1637443>

²⁹ Hasnat, M., 'Religious and ethnic minorities are most persecuted in Bangladesh', Dhaka Tribune, 28 December 2017, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2017/12/28/religious-ethnic-minorities-persecuted-bangladesh/>

³⁰ Minority Rights Group, Bangladesh Hindus, July 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/hindus/>

grabbing, violence and forced conversion.³¹ The Anti-Discrimination Bill proposed in 2014 to protect the rights of the marginalised community has yet to be enacted.³²

Christians, who make up around 0.5% of the population, also live in a state of constant fear of being singled out and discriminated against by others.³³ In January 2018 three Christian men were beaten up at the St. Mothumath Assemblies of God Church in Gopalganj district, southwest of Dhaka, reportedly part of a long-running dispute over a fish pond that belongs to the church. A local source said that the fish "are a source of income and the local political group has been trying for years to grab it but failed".³⁴ According to Christian leaders, many Christian families have left Bangladesh due to violent attacks by Islamist hardliners.³⁵ In schools, children of Christian parents are required to use Islamic text books distributed by the government which prevents them and other children from learning about and respecting their own religion.³⁶ Known converts to Christianity are routinely harassed, humiliated, threatened and even killed, treatment which is fuelled by those with stringent views against conversion. In February 2018, the Dhaka Tribune reported on the arrest of 2 members of banned militant group Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), one of whom was reportedly planning to kill Muslims who had converted to Christianity.³⁷

Members of Hefazat-e-Islam, an Islamist coalition and pressure group of with bases at more than 25,000 madrassas across the country, have been propagating against the Ahmadiyya religious minority. Ahmadis are a constant target of Sunni extremists who demand that they should be officially declared 'non-Muslim'.³⁸ Likewise, Shia Muslims, another minority within the larger Muslim community, have been the victim of sectarian hate and violence. Shia places of worship, processions and community members have been attacked.

Liberal, progressive and atheist bloggers and authorities have not been provided with a safe environment to live and express views in Bangladesh.³⁹ The 2013 amendment to the Information and Telecommunication Act has made the criticism of religion online punishable with up to 14 years in prison. At least 10 bloggers were murdered between 2013 and 2016.⁴⁰ Zafar Iqbal, a celebrated secular activist and bestselling science fiction writer, was attacked in March 2018.⁴¹

Bangladesh's blasphemy law is another tool used to silent, repress and justify violence against religious minorities and anyone else deemed to be dissenting against the Bangladeshi regime or powerful Islamist groups. Section 295A of Bangladesh's Penal Code (1860), declares that anyone with a "deliberate" or "malicious" intention of "hurting religious sentiments" is liable to imprisonment. This clause has empowered political groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Jamaat-e-Islami to accuse of blasphemy or even carry out vigilante mob violence towards those with whom they disagree based on their religious or non-religious views.⁴² In November 2017, a mob of nearly 20,000 looted and

³¹ *ibid*

³² New Age Bangladesh, 'Anti-discrimination law demanded to protect rights of Dalits'. 13 November 2017, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/28258/anti-discrimination-law-demanded-to-protect-rights-of-dalits->

³³ Open Doors, 'World Watch List 2017: Bangladesh', <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/bangladesh/>

³⁴ World Watch Monitor, 'Bangladesh: Christians 'appreciated' but attacks continue' 26 January, 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/bangladesh-christians-appreciated-attacks-continue/>

³⁵ The Hindu, 'Bangladesh's Christians live in constant fear' 26 November 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/christians-here-live-in-constant-fear/article20945133.ece>

³⁶ Open Doors USA, 'Bangladesh' 2018, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/bangladesh/>

³⁷ Dhaka Tribune, 'RAB arrests two JMB militants', 13 February 2018

³⁸ Minority Rights Group, 'Bangladesh' July 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/bangladesh/>

³⁹ Bangladesh Association of Software & Information Services, 'ICT Amendment Act 2013', <https://basis.org.bd/index.php/site/gazette/16>

⁴⁰ Petersmann, S., 'Bangladesh blogger: the wrath of a father demanding justice for his son's murder' DW, 20 April, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-blogger-the-wrath-of-a-father-demanding-justice-for-his-sons-murder/a-43417391>

⁴¹ The Express Tribune, 'Top secular writer attacked in Bangladesh' 3 March 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1650343/3-top-secular-writer-attacked-bangladesh/>

⁴² Humanists UK, 'Humanist Blogger Avijit Roy Hacked to Death by Islamic Fundamentalists in Dhaka', 27 February 2015, <https://humanism.org.uk/2015/02/27/humanist-blogger-avijit-roy-hacked-death-islamic-fundamentalists-dhaka/>

burned down over 30 homes in the majority-Hindu Thakurpara village in Rangpur Sadar, in response to rumours that a villager had published a Facebook post defaming the Prophet Muhammad.⁴³

The Rohingya crisis in Burma has seen hundreds of thousands of largely Muslim refugees arrive in Bangladesh, where they are living in state of ambiguity. The temporary camps and living conditions are sub-standard, with nearly 900,000 people facing harsh weather conditions with little access to basic facilities. Rohingya refugees are deeply concerned about the government's intention to return them to Burma.⁴⁴ United Nations officials have objected to the plan, underlining that the conditions in Rakhine state are "not yet conducive for returns".⁴⁵ There are a small number of Christian converts among the Rohingya people. They risk being ostracised by their own people, so many choose to keep their faith a secret, living in a manner which will not arouse their community's suspicion.⁴⁶

Burma (Myanmar)

Around 90% of the population of Burma is Buddhist, with the country also home to small minorities of Christians (6%) and Muslims (2%) as well as small Animist and Hindu communities. Around 0.5% or less identify as having no faith.⁴⁷

Burma has a long history of FoRB violations stemming from the military junta which controlled the country for over 50 years from 1962. Although the military has supposedly handed over power to a democratic, civilian government, it has retained control of key institutions under the Constitution such as the Ministries of Home Affairs, Border Affairs and Defence. The military also retain 25% of parliamentary seats.⁴⁸

The military and its affiliated political party has fuelled a movement of Burman Buddhist nationalism that has led to a dramatic rise in religious intolerance throughout the country. The party principally preaches hatred towards Muslims but also threatens Christians and other non-Buddhists and even affects Buddhists who attempt to oppose it. Government legislation has contributed to religious intolerance. In 2015, the previous government introduced a package of four laws aimed at the 'protection of race and religion'. This package introduced restrictions on religious conversions and interfaith marriage which furthered discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities.⁴⁹

On 25 August 2017, the Burmese army unleashed a military offensive that forced around 700,000 of the predominantly Muslim Rohingya to flee from their villages into neighbouring Bangladesh. Médecins Sans Frontières conservatively estimate that 6,700 Rohingya, including at least 730 children under the age of five, were killed in the first month of the violence.⁵⁰ Human rights organisations have reported extensive and severe human rights violations against the Rohingya including the burning of

⁴³ Human Rights Watch, 'Country Chapters: Bangladesh', 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/bangladesh>

⁴⁴ UN News, 'UN Chief heads to Bangladesh to spotlight continuing perils facing Rohingya community', June 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/06/1013602> and <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/08/05/bangladesh-not-my-country/plight-rohingya-refugees-myanmar>

⁴⁵ The Telegraph, 'Rohingya refugee attempts suicide as repatriation fears rise', 8 Nov 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/08/rohingya-refugee-attempts-suicide-repatriation-fears-rise/>

⁴⁶ Open Doors UK, 'Life-saving aid for 1,000 Rohingya Refugees', Oct 2017, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/bangladesh-171004/>

⁴⁷ USCIRF. Annual Report 2018, <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

⁴⁸ McPherson, Poppy. 'We must protect our country': extremist Buddhists target Mandalay's Muslims. The Guardian, 8 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/may/08/buddhist-extremists-anti-muslim-mandalay-ma-ba-tha>

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch. World Report 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/burma>

⁵⁰ Médecins Sans Frontières. MSF surveys estimate that at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed during the attacks in Myanmar, 12th Dec 2017. <https://www.msf.org/myanmarbangladesh-msf-surveys-estimate-least-6700-rohingya-were-killed-during-attacks-myanmar> Date accessed: 12/11/18

homes, mass rape, torture, execution without trial, and the blocking of humanitarian aid to those affected.⁵¹

The UN Secretary-General described the situation as “catastrophic” and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights deemed these incidents “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. The UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma has stated that the situation has the “hallmarks” of genocide, and the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission established by the UN Human Rights Council has affirmed that it has documented evidence of genocide.⁵²

This latest humanitarian crisis follows decades of severe persecution of the Rohingya people. Burma has continued to deny Rohingyas citizenship, rendering them stateless. The 1982 Citizenship Law remains in force, even though the Rohingyas have lived in the country for several centuries. The law has a very serious impact on the Rohingya community, who are denied citizenship rights such as the right to vote, to move freely, or to access basic services.⁵³

In recent months, the Burmese army has also escalated its offensive in Kachin areas. Although clashes between the Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Army have been ongoing since the ceasefire agreement collapsed in 2011, they have intensified and exacerbated what the United Nations describes as a “longstanding humanitarian crisis”.⁵⁴ In March 2018 the Burmese Army launched a fresh offensive in Karen State, displacing more than 2,400 people from their homes, according to a report by the Karen Peace Support Network.⁵⁵ On 12 May 2018, Burmese military jet fighters bombed Kachin Baptist Mission School in Bawmwang village, northern Kachin State.⁵⁶ Across Kachin and northern Shan state, an estimated 120,000 people have been displaced by fighting.⁵⁷

In their statement on 23 April 2018, the predominantly Christian Kachin community warned of an escalation of Burma Army military offensives against the country’s ethnic groups: “The Burma military is escalating attacks against ethnic groups in the country, including in Rakhine state, Kachin state, Shan state and most recently breaking the ceasefire in Karen state.”⁵⁸

In the notices issued by the UNHCR on June 13th and 19th in Malaysia and New Delhi respectively, Chin State was deemed to be stable and secure from a refugee perspective, thus paving the way for the return of Chin refugees from these areas.⁵⁹ However, the Chin Human Rights Organisation has detailed ongoing systematic killings, torture and other forms of cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment towards Chin people, and particularly the Christian Chin community.⁶⁰ Some of these violations result, for example, from escalating violence between the Arakan Army militia and Burmese military around the Paletwa Township of Chin State, which has displaced 7,000 people in the past two years.⁶¹ The

⁵¹ CSW, Report on human rights violations in Rakhine State, CSW, 12th January 2017, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2017/01/12/report/3423/article.htm>

⁵² United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/International-Fact-Finding-Report-on-Myanmar.pdf>

⁵³ CSW, ‘ID with the High Commissioner on Rohingya’, CSW, 13th July 2018. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/13/report/4040/article.htm> Date accessed: 21/08/18.

⁵⁴ CSW, ‘The struggle for justice and freedom in Burma’, CSW, 21st May 2018. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/05/21/feature/3982/article.htm> Date accessed: 29/08/18.

⁵⁵ Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN), ‘The Nightmare Returns: Karen hopes for peace and stability dashed by Burma Army’s actions’. KPSN, April 2018. Pg. 11. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dNkd-axRJKVjTprZuODksMxopUpOPSSY/view>

⁵⁶ CSW, ‘Burma army targets Kachin Christian Mission School’, CSW, 14th May 2018. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/05/14/press/3971/article.htm>

⁵⁷ BBC News, ‘Myanmar violence: Thousands flee fresh fighting in Kachin state’, 28 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-43933332>

⁵⁸ CSW, ‘Burma: Renewed fighting in Kachin State’, CSW, 1st May 2018. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/05/01/press/3945/article.htm> Date accessed: 21/08/18

⁵⁹ Chin Human Rights Organization, “Stable and Secure?” An Assessment on the Current Context of Human Rights for Chin People in Burma/Myanmar, 2018, http://www.chro.ca/images/CHRO_Stable-and-Secure-report-2018.pdf.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Independent International Fact-Finding Mission has concluded that actions of the Burma army in Kachin and Shan states amount to crimes against humanity.⁶²

Central African Republic

80% of the Central African Republic's (CAR) population is estimated to be Christian (51% Protestant and 29% Roman Catholic). A further 10% are Muslim, with another 5% belonging to other religions and 5% claiming to be unaffiliated.⁶³ One of the most vulnerable groups in relation to FoRB violations are those who have exercised the right to change belief.

Prior to 2013, there was a strong interfaith tradition in the CAR, despite regular political violence and attempted coups. The 2013 coup by the Seleka, a majority Muslim coalition, placed religion in a central role for the first time.⁶⁴ Continued violence led to the formation of anti-Balaka groups. These groups are widely described as "Christian militia" although in reality they are composed of pre-existing village defence groups bolstered by former soldiers loyal to deposed President Bozize, former Seleka fighters, angry youths seeking revenge for Seleka violations, and common criminals. This conflict has severely damaged social cohesion between religious communities and is a key cause of the continued violence witnessed today.⁶⁵ These armed groups are present in nearly 80% of CAR's territory, where they are responsible for grave violations of human rights and humanitarian law. Although Seleka was formally disbanded in September 2013, many of its former members continue to operate throughout the country.

The human rights situation in the country remains poor with civilians caught up or targeted by armed groups. The majority of FoRB violations occur in Seleka – or anti-Balaka – controlled areas, where government presence has been minimalised and both militias have created their own informal administrative structures and exert control over citizens with impunity. In areas controlled by Seleka in the north of CAR such as Kaka Bango, the local population lives under severe restrictions. Seleka imposes informal and *ad hoc* taxes and restricts free movement of people and goods. The threat of violence is ever present; those who refuse to comply with the group's demands are frequently attacked, often fatally.⁶⁶ These restrictions often prevent religious communities from meeting together to carry out their religious practices.

In the anti-Balaka-held regions in the south-west of the country, Christians are generally free to worship and express their faith in public and in private, whereas Muslims face far more restrictions. As a result, very few Muslims remain in the area. The anti-Balaka have also targeted Christian religious leaders who advocate for Muslims and have attacked those involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation between Muslims and Christians.⁶⁷

⁶² United Nations Human Rights Council, 'Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar' September 2018, <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/International-Fact-Finding-Report-on-Myanmar.pdf>

⁶³ USCIRF, 'Annual Report 2018' <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

⁶⁴ World Watch Monitor, 'Anxiety high as rebels take over Central African Republic' 25 March 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/03/anxiety-high-as-rebels-take-over-central-african-republic/>

⁶⁵ CSW and CSW-Nigeria, 'Central African Republic (CAR) stakeholder submission to the universal periodic review, 31st session', CSW website, April 2018. Pg. 1. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/05/report/3901/article.htm>

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

In January 2018, 1,000 displaced Muslims were reported to be sheltering in Bangassou Cathedral, having fled attacks by anti-Balaka groups.⁶⁸ Armed groups were patrolling outside the Cathedral, waiting for Muslims to emerge. On 18 January the armed groups killed a Muslim man.

The Church has now been put in a difficult position, with “anti-Balakas viewing the Church as a traitor for protecting Muslims... and Seleka seeing the Church as complicit with the anti-Balakas.”⁶⁹ There was an attack at Our Lady of Fatima Church in Bangui on 1 May.⁷⁰ According to the CAR Red Cross 27 people were killed, and more than 170 were wounded.⁷¹ Grenades were thrown and shots fired into a crowd attending Mass. The perpetrators are believed to have come from a nearby predominantly Muslim neighbourhood, home to number of former Seleka soldiers.⁷² This attack led to further reprisals, including the burning of a local mosque.⁷³

Suspected Islamist rebels attacked a group of civilians in the central town of Bria on 4-5 September. Early reports suggested around 14 were killed, but local sources said as many as 42 were killed, as details about the attacks emerged in the further two days it took to access the area.

On a positive note, CAR’s top three religious leaders – a Protestant pastor, a Catholic archbishop and a Muslim imam – who created the ‘Plateforme des Confessions Religieuses de Centrafrique’ in an effort to contain and then reconcile the deeply divisive religious and civil forces tearing at their country, won the Eliasson Global Leadership Prize⁷⁴ in September 2018. Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Pastor Nicolas Guérékoyame-Gbangou & Imam Omar Kobine Layama have previously won a UN award, the 2015 Sergio Vieira de Mello Prize.⁷⁵

China

Over 52% of China’s population identify as having no religion. The next largest faith groups are those practicing folk religions and Buddhists, who make up approximately 22% and 18% of China’s population respectively. 5% of the population is Christian, and 2% are Muslim, with very small proportions of Hindus, Jews and Taoists among other religions.⁷⁶

Although the Chinese Constitution protects all ‘normal’ religious activities, only five religions are recognised: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism⁷⁷ – and only those groups governed by state-sanctioned ‘patriotic’ associations enjoy any degree of the protection offered these faith groups in article 26 of the constitution.⁷⁸ China advanced its so-called ‘sinicisation’ of religion throughout 2017, a far-reaching strategy to control, govern, and manipulate all aspects of faith into a

⁶⁸ O Flaherty, Murcadha. ‘CAR: UN troops ignoring warnings that Muslim IDPs could be slaughtered’. Aid to the Church in Need, 30 January 2018, <https://acnuk.org/news/car-un-troops-ignoring-warnings-that-muslim-idps-could-be-slaughtered/>

⁶⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁰ CSW. ‘CAR: Catholic Priest killed in Church attack’, CSW, May 4 2018, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/05/04/press/3956/article.htm> Date accessed: 22/08/18 and O’ Flaherty, Murcadha and Newton, John, ‘CAR: Priest witnesses Church attack- at least 19 killed’, Aid to the Church in Need UK, 3 May 2018. <https://acnuk.org/news/car-priest-witnesses-church-attack-at-least-19-killed/> Date accessed: 22/08/18.

⁷¹ Aid to the Church in Need, “Central African Republic”, Religious Freedom in the World report 2018, www.religion-freedom-report.org

⁷² *Ibid*.

⁷³ CSW, ‘CAR: Catholic Priest killed in Church attack’. CSW, 4 May 2018, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/05/04/press/3956/article.htm>

⁷⁴ Eliasson Global Leadership Prize, 2018, <https://eliassongloballeadership.org/>

⁷⁵ World watch Monitor, ‘Religious freedom a ‘reality’ in recovering CAR’ 26 August 2015, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/08/religious-freedom-a-reality-in-recovering-car/>

⁷⁶ USCIRF, Annual Report 2018, <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

⁷⁷ CSW, ‘Stakeholder submission to the Universal Periodic Review, 31st session’, CSW, April 2018. Pg. 1. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/06/report/3902/article.htm>

⁷⁸ Aid to the Church in Need, “China”, Religious Freedom in the World report 2018, www.religion-freedom-report.org

‘socialist’ mould infused with ‘Chinese characteristics.’⁷⁹ In April 2018, for example, online sales of the Bible were banned and according to an official document released by China’s State Administration for Religion entitled, “Principle for Promoting the Chinese Christianity in China for the Next Five Years (2018-2022)” there have been efforts to produce a new version of the Chinese Bible with a more ‘sinicised’ text.⁸⁰

On 1 February 2018, the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs came into effect, with some commentators suggesting that they could lead to the most severe crackdown on Christianity since the Cultural Revolution.⁸¹ These Regulations make it easy for the authorities to persecute religious organisations: they confine religious activities to registered sites,⁸² and any new or established site must be in harmony with the needs of urban planning.⁸³ This tightening of government policy has led to significantly worse conditions for many religious groups not registered with the state-sanctioned system, while certain registered religious groups have also had their activities and practices restricted.

Many churches have had their crosses and other religious items removed, often to be replaced with symbols such as the Chinese flag. In April 2018, Beixishangum Catholic Church had its cross taken away, as well as children’s Bibles and other books. The church’s finances were also taken over by the authorities.⁸⁴ Churches belonging to the government-controlled ‘Three Self Patriotic Movement’ have been required to sing patriotic pro-communist songs.⁸⁵ In Qianwang Shandong, a 268-year-old church was destroyed in August 2018.⁸⁶ Mosques have also been targeted, in August 2018 leaders of local mosques in Ningxia were told to ‘destroy all unregistered mosques or have them torn down by the government.’⁸⁷ Lu Yongfeng, a member of The Church of Almighty God, was arrested with her husband in June 2018. The following month she died in police custody, reportedly as a result of torture.⁸⁸

On 30 August 2018 a joint statement – now signed by 439 Chinese church leaders – was issued which said “In September 2017, the State Council issued the new ‘Regulations on the Administration of Religious Affairs’ and began implementing these regulations in February 2018. Ever since then, Christian churches across China have suffered varying degrees of persecution, contempt, and misunderstanding from government departments during public worship and religious practices, including various administrative measures that attempt to alter and distort the Christian faith. Some of these violent actions are unprecedented since the end of the Cultural Revolution... We believe that these unjust actions are an abuse of government power and have led to serious conflicts between

⁷⁹ World Watch Research, China Dossier, 2018, Pg.13

⁸⁰ The St. Charles Institute, ‘439* Christian Leaders’, Sept. 2018, <http://www.stcharlesinstitute.org/voices/2018/9/4/198-chinese-christian-leadersand-countingsign-public-joint-statement>

⁸¹ Release International, ‘Chinese New Year herald’s new restrictions for Christians’ Release International, February 2018. <https://releaseinternational.org/chinese-new-year-heralds-new-restrictions-christians/>

⁸² CSW, ‘Stakeholder submission to the Universal Periodic Review, 31st session’, Pg. 2, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/06/report/3902/article.htm>

⁸³ Release International, ‘Chinese New Year herald’s new restrictions for Christians’ Release International, February 2018. <https://releaseinternational.org/chinese-new-year-heralds-new-restrictions-christians/>

⁸⁴ UCAN News, ‘Church crackdown intensifies in China’s Henan province’, 20 April 2018. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/church-crackdown-intensifies-in-chinas-henan-province/82111>

⁸⁵ CSW, ‘Chinese church’s call for rights to be respected’, July 2018, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/27/press/4054/article.html>

⁸⁶ China Aid, ‘Jinan officials tear down third Catholic Church in a year’, 17th August 2018. <http://www.chinaaid.org/2018/08/jinan-officials-tear-down-third.html>

⁸⁷ China Aid, ‘Government orders mosque demolitions’, China Aid, 10 August 2018, <http://www.chinaaid.org/2018/08/government-orders-mosque-demolitions.html>

⁸⁸ Human Rights Without Frontiers, ‘China’, November 2018, <http://hrwf.eu/china-the-cag-members-persecuted-to-death-by-the-ccp-just-a-few-months-ago-lu-yongfeng-was-persecuted-to-death-now-her-daughter-is-detained-after-attempting-to-flee-to-the-us/>

political and religious parties in Chinese society. These actions infringe on the human freedoms of religion and conscience and violate the universal rule of law.”⁸⁹

There has been a particular crackdown in Xinjiang province, where, since 2017, up to one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and members of other ethnic groups are believed to have been detained for varying periods of time without charge in ‘re-education camps’.⁹⁰ Sometimes this is in connection with their peaceful religious activities, including praying or wearing ‘Islamic’ clothing.⁹¹ Inside the camps, detainees have been forced to renounce their faith, and children of detainees have been sent to state orphanages. The October 2018 BBC report highlighted the rapid development of sites which are believed to be imprisoning Uyghur Muslims in the hundreds of thousands.⁹²

Falun Gong has been banned since 1999. Since then, thousands of Falun Gong practitioners have been arbitrarily detained.⁹³ It is widely reported by lawyers and Falun Gong organisations that a task force, the 610 Office, was established specifically to eradicate Falun Gong. Former Canadian cabinet minister David Kilgour, human rights lawyer David Matas and investigative journalist Ethan Gutmann have produced a series of reports which meticulously examine the transplant programs of hundreds of hospitals in China. These reports provide substantial evidence to suggest that Falun Gong practitioners, and other prisoners of conscience, have been victims of forced organ harvesting.⁹⁴ This evidence has led numerous countries to condemn the practice and to introduce legislation to prevent organ tourism to China. For example, in 2016, the United States House of Representatives passed Resolution 343 which “condemns the practice of state-sanctioned forced organ harvesting in the People’s Republic of China” and “demands an immediate end to the persecution of the Falun Gong spiritual practice.”⁹⁵

Tibetan Buddhists’ religious practice is tightly controlled by the authorities. There are ongoing reports of religious services being disrupted, religious institutions intrusively monitored, religious sites closed, property confiscated, and cases of arbitrary administrative detention and restrictions on religious teaching and training.⁹⁶ Tibetans are being incarcerated for teaching their own language.⁹⁷ Buddhist teachings are written in the Tibetan language and without the language skills, this generation will not have access to their own religion and culture. Many Tibetan monks are in prison without representation and thousands of Buddhist monasteries have been destroyed. Some Tibetans have responded to the discrimination against them by self-immolation.⁹⁸ There are concerns amongst the Tibetan community that China is increasing its pressure on the international community to prevent support for religious freedom for Tibetans.

⁸⁹ St Charles Institute, ‘439* Christian Leaders’, November 2018, <http://www.stcharlesinstitute.org/voices/2018/9/4/198-chinese-christian-leadersand-countingsign-public-joint-statement>

⁹⁰ Congressional-Executive Commission on China, ‘Chairs Raise Alarm About Deteriorating Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang’, 8 January 2018 <https://www.cecc.gov/media-center/press-releases/chairs-raise-alarm-about-deteriorating-human-rights-situation-in>

⁹¹ *ibid*

⁹² BBC News, ‘China’s Hidden Camps’, 24 October 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/China_hidden_camps

⁹³ US Commission on International Religious Freedom. China Chapter. https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_CHINA.pdf

⁹⁴ China Organ Harvest Research Centre. ‘The Killing of Prisoners of Conscience for Organs in China’, <https://www.chinaorganharvest.org/report/findings/executive-summary/>

⁹⁵ US House of Representatives, Resolution 343, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-resolution/343/text> Date

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch, ‘“Illegal Organisations”: China’s Crackdown on Tibetan Social Groups’, 30 July 2018,

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/07/30/illegal-organizations/chinas-crackdown-tibetan-social-groups>

⁹⁷ The Guardian, ‘Activist Sentenced to Five Years in Prison for Promoting Tibetan Language’, 22 May 2018,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/22/activist-sentenced-to-five-years-in-prison-for-promoting-tibetan-language>

⁹⁸ International Campaign for Tibet, ‘Self-immolation by Tibetans’, 7 March 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/resources/factsheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/>

Colombia

The main religion in Colombia is Christianity with 79% of the population professing Catholicism and a further 14% estimated to be Protestants. Around 5% of the population do not specify that they have any religion.⁹⁹

Despite important steps towards peace and respect for human rights more generally, human rights violations, including violations of FoRB¹⁰⁰, are common. This is especially so in conflict zones or areas of the country with a significant presence of illegal armed groups. Some leaders of indigenous communities are opposed to Christianity and other non-traditional religions as they perceive them as threatening to their identity and culture.¹⁰¹ In areas controlled by indigenous authorities, Christian schools suffer persecution with school permits denied and teachers imprisoned.¹⁰²

Illegal armed groups, including leftist guerrilla groups, neo-paramilitaries and criminal groups, operate on the basis of total control in the areas where they have a presence. Strong or growing churches, whose members do not share the values of the group, can be viewed as a threat to the authority of the illegal armed groups.¹⁰³ Illegal armed groups have placed harsh restrictions on religious practice or banned it altogether in some areas. There have also been regular infringements upon freedom of assembly and FoRB through the enforcement of strict rules that include prohibiting free movement in areas under their influence and the prevention of church services after certain times.¹⁰⁴ Violence is particularly intense following gang members' conversions to Christianity.¹⁰⁵

In one region three pastors reported that illegal armed groups are holding obligatory meetings in their communities. Here the groups advise the community that they must allow members of the illegal armed groups into their homes to sleep, be fed, and be referred to as family. If the government comes to the community, they must defend the person staying in their house, and maintain that they are part of the family. Threats have been made of punishment for non-compliance. This puts church leaders in the difficult position of having to comply with the illegal armed groups' demands and participate in illegal actions, or face threats and possible forced displacement.¹⁰⁶

In rural areas, church leaders often hold wider leadership roles within the community, making them greater targets for attacks. As such, the UN has recognised church leaders as human rights defenders under particular threat.¹⁰⁷ In May 2018, a pastor reported that two armed men arrived at his house and threw his wife to the floor before leaving. On two previous occasions the same group had threatened the pastor and his family unless he paid them money.¹⁰⁸ On 14 July 2018 members of JUSTAPAZ,¹⁰⁹ a Christian Mennonite association which promotes non-violent peacebuilding processes, received death threats from a group identifying itself as the Black Eagles.¹¹⁰ This group

⁹⁹CIA, World Factbook. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/co.html>

¹⁰⁰ Freedom of Religion or Belief

¹⁰¹ Open Doors, 'Colombia Fact Sheet', 2018, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/World-Watch-Fact-Sheets-2018-49.pdf>

¹⁰² Open Doors, 'Colombia: Country Profile' 2018, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/colombia/>

¹⁰³ CSW, 'Colombia: Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Conscience', February 2016, Pg. 5, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2016/02/26/report/2997/article.htm>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Pg. 4-5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Pg. 5.

¹⁰⁶ CSW, 'Latin America: Colombia', https://www.csw.org.uk/our_work_country_colombia.htm

¹⁰⁷ CSW, 'Colombia: Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Conscience', February 2016, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2016/02/26/report/2997/article.htm>

¹⁰⁸ CSW, 'Latin America: Colombia', https://www.csw.org.uk/our_work_country_colombia.htm

¹⁰⁹ JUSTAPAZ is a Christian Mennonite association with a long history of promoting non-violent peacebuilding processes and accompanying Christian churches, organizations and victims of the armed conflict in Colombia.

¹¹⁰ Global Ministries, 'Justapaz Statement on Recent Death Threat', 19 July 2018.

https://www.globalministries.org/justapaz_statement_on_recent_death_threat

has a history of threatening evangelical churches and leaders.¹¹¹ On the 16 September, ‘a pastor had refused demands by the men from an illegal armed group to transport them on his boat. The men left but returned at 7pm accompanied by two others on motorbikes. After calling Pastor Martínez Pérez out of his home, they reportedly said: “As you are a pastor, we will only shoot you once”. One of the men then shot and killed the pastor in front of his home.’

Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)

The highly secretive nature of the regime means that it is difficult to obtain and confirm estimates of the religious demography of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea. Despite this, it is estimated that less than 1% of the population are Christian. The country is also home to adherents of Buddhism, Confucianism, Shamanism and a local religious movement known as Chondoism.¹¹²

North Korea is the world’s most closed, isolated and repressive state, and has one of the worst human rights records. The gravity and extent of human rights abuses were exposed in the ground-breaking United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on human rights in North Korea, published in February 2014 after a year-long investigation. The Commission concluded that the gravity, scale and nature of the violations of human rights in North Korea “reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world”.¹¹³

There is no freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and any North Korean who expresses an opinion or a belief which differs from the regime’s propaganda faces severe punishment. The COI report noted that “there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”.¹¹⁴ One former citizen of North Korea reported that “when it comes to religion, North Korean people just shudder because punishment is very severe.”¹¹⁵

Religious groups face extreme persecution: public executions, arrest, forced labour, imprisonment and torture are a daily threat for religious believers. The *songbun* system of social classification has institutionalised this discrimination and persecution. A person’s *songbun* classification affects nearly every aspect of their life, including access to healthcare, education, food rations and employment opportunities. It even plays a role in how they are criminally punished. Authorities are therefore able to act with impunity against ‘hostile’ faith-based groups.

The COI concluded that the regime “considers the spread of Christianity a particularly severe threat”, as Christianity is heavily perceived as being linked with foreign imperialism, intervention and espionage by the United States. As a result, “Christians are prohibited from practising their religion and are persecuted”. Indeed, North Korea has ranked top of Open Doors’ World Watch List, its annual survey of the religious liberty conditions of Christians around the world, every year for the last 16 years.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ CSW, ‘Colombia: Freedom of Religion or Belief’, CSW, September 2015. Pg. 2.

<https://www.csw.org.uk/2015/09/29/report/2780/article.htm>

¹¹² USCIRF, Annual Report 2018. <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

¹¹³ UNHRC, Report of the Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – A/HRC/25/63, 7 February 2014, p. 15. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx>

¹¹⁴ UNHRC, Report of the Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – A/HRC/25/63, 7 February 2014, p. 15. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx>

¹¹⁵ CSW, ‘Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance’, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/01/31/report/3832/article.htm>, Pg. 27.

¹¹⁶ Hyun-min An, Yeo-sang Yoon, Jai-ho Chung. Op. Cit. Pg. 86.

Severe punishments are inflicted on people ‘caught practising Christianity’. Documented incidents include Christians being hung on a cross over a fire, crushed under a steamroller, herded off bridges, and trampled under-foot.

Perhaps the most brutal aspect of the state’s control is its policy of crushing political dissent through the use of large scale political internment camps, otherwise known as *kwanliso*. An estimated 80,000-120,000 people are currently detained within four large prison camps.¹¹⁷ UN officials estimated that there were between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians held in these camps,¹¹⁸ with others estimating a lower number of 30,000.¹¹⁹ Many keep their faith secret to avoid persecution, making figures difficult to verify. The brutality of these prison camps is typified by the extremely harsh conditions under which they are run. Prisoners are subjected to intense labour on minimal food rations, as well as beatings, torture, executions and rape. The War Crimes Committee of the International Bar Association’s December 2017 report noted that Christians are “tortured and killed on account of their religious affiliation” and are “incarcerated in specific zones within the prison camp at which prisoners were subjected to more severe deprivation”.¹²⁰

Egypt

Egypt is a majority Sunni Muslim country and with around 90% of the population being Sunni, a large proportion of these following Sufism, they are well-established in the social fabric’.¹²¹ Nearly all Muslims are Sunni, with a large proportion of these following Sufism. Salafi Muslims number c.6 million, with Ahmadis, Shi’ites and Mu’tazilis making up the remaining 91%. Coptic Christians (c.8-9%), other Christian denominations (1%),¹²² Baha’is (0.003%), Jehovah’s Witnesses (0.002%) and Jews who number fewer than 40, constitute the final 9% of the population.¹²³ There are significant human rights abuses in Egypt and the right to freedom of religion or belief continues to be denied.¹²⁴ A growing number of Egypt’s citizens are announcing themselves as atheists but sharp responses from the government, meting out prison sentences, is restricting the numbers of those willing to publically declare their beliefs.

Egypt has long been divided along sectarian lines, with short-lived Muslim Brotherhood rule and the influence of Daesh¹²⁵ exacerbating tensions. President Sisi has spoken about the need for greater tolerance and taken a few symbolic actions, including becoming the first Egyptian leader to attend Coptic Christmas Eve Mass.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, there remains a high level of government restriction on religion. The government is largely unable to protect Christian places of worship from bomb attacks or Christians themselves from kidnap and extortion.¹²⁷ Daesh claimed responsibility for three church bombings in 2016 and 2017 in which 70 people were killed and more than 100 injured. This year,

¹¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, ‘North Korea: Events of 2016’, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/north-korea>

¹¹⁸ Open Doors, North Korea Country Profile, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/north-korea/?ref=wwmap>

¹¹⁹ Release International ‘NK Pre-Olympic Military Parade Must Trigger Prayer for Persecuted’, <https://releaseinternational.org/nk-pre-olympic-military-parade-must-trigger-prayer-persecuted/>

¹²⁰ International Bar Association, ‘IBA War Crimes Committee Inquiry on Crimes Against Humanity in North Korean Political Prisons’, <https://www.ibanet.org/IBA-War-Crimes-Committee---Inquiry-on-Crimes-Against-Humanity-in.aspx>

¹²¹ CIA, ‘The World Factbook: Egypt’, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html>

¹²² Delhaye, Gregoire, ‘Contemporary Muslim-Christian Relations in Egypt: Local Dynamics and Foreign Influences’, in Longva, Anh Nga; Roald, Anne (eds.), *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, p.71

¹²³ USCIRF, ‘Tier 2: Egypt’, 2018, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_EGYPT.pdf

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch, ‘Country Chapters: Egypt’, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/egypt>

¹²⁵ World Watch Monitor, 21 November 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/isis-the-greatest-preacher-for-christianity-in-the-world/>

¹²⁶ USCIRF, ‘Tier 2: Egypt’, 2018, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_EGYPT.pdf

¹²⁷ Pew Research Center, April 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/religious-restrictions-vary-significantly-in-the-worlds-most-populous-countries/>

Copts were attacked multiple times and in several places during the Muslim celebration of Eid al-Adha. One week earlier a suicide attack on a Coptic church in north Cairo was thwarted. In November 2018 three buses carrying Christian pilgrims on their way to a remote desert monastery south of Cairo were ambushed, killing seven people and wounding 19; the local Daesh affiliate claimed responsibility.¹²⁸ While in this case police killed 19 terrorist suspects,¹²⁹ in general the authorities have failed to prosecute those who attack Christians and have instead enforced state-sponsored reconciliation agreements which provide impunity for the perpetrators and leave Christians vulnerable to future attacks.¹³⁰

In addition, there remains a high level of social hostility towards different religious groups¹³¹ – mobs regularly attack churches, Shia Muslims experience active discrimination,¹³² and Copts are harassed for drinking water during Ramadan fasting hours and gathering to pray in houses; they are at risk of looting.¹³³ These targeted actions are particularly supported by Salafi militants within the country.

Egypt inflicts severe penalties for declaring oneself to be an atheist, including up to five years' imprisonment. In January 2018 the Head of the Egyptian Parliament's Committee on Religion put forward new legislation to outlaw atheism that was debated in Parliament and considered by the President.¹³⁴ That this law was even considered highlights the environment that those with no religious beliefs experience and the risk taken if they publically state them. 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.¹³⁵

It remains difficult to open places of worship for recognised faiths, though the Egyptian government has prioritised the reconstruction of several significant non-Muslim places of worship. In October 2018 it was reported that only 340 out of 3,730 applications from unlicensed churches seeking legal status and building permits had been granted under the 2016 Church Construction Law, meant to provide an avenue for Christians to legally build and renovate churches.¹³⁶ Many unregistered churches have waited around 15-20 years already to be registered by the state; meanwhile they remain vulnerable to being shut down or attacked. The church in Ezbet Sultan Pasha village, Minya, faced concerted mob attacks with police complicity when seeking legalisation in July 2018.¹³⁷ On 2 July 2018, a man's fields were burned days after he was accused of planning to turn his home into a house church.¹³⁸

¹²⁸ The Guardian, 3 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/03/egypt-attack-gunmen-kill-coptic-christians-bus-ambush>

¹²⁹ BBC News, 'Coptic Christian Attack', 4 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-46090104>

¹³⁰ Amnesty International, 'Egypt: Government must protect Coptic Christians targeted in string of deadly attacks in North Sinai', 1 March 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/egypt-government-must-protect-coptic-christians-targeted-in-string-of-deadly-attacks-in-north-sinai/>

¹³¹ Pew Research Center, 'Appendix B: Social hostilities Index', <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2018/06/19152147/APPENDIX-B-1.pdf>

¹³² Minority Rights Group, 'Egypt: Shi'a of Egypt', October 2017, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/shia-of-egypt/>

¹³³ World Watch Monitor, 'Coptic Christians harassed for drinking water during Ramadan fasting hours', 13 June 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/coptic-christians-harassed-for-drinking-water-during-ramadan-fasting-hours/>

¹³⁴ Religion News Service, 'Egyptian Parliament considers outlawing atheism', 4 January 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/01/04/egyptian-parliament-considers-outlawing-atheism/>

¹³⁵ IHEU, 'Freedom of Thought Report 2018', <https://freethoughtreport.com/countries/africa-northern-africa/egypt/>

¹³⁶ Christian Post, 'Over 3,000 Egyptian churches still waiting for licenses 2 years after landmark law', 5 November 2018, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/over-3000-egyptian-churches-still-waiting-licenses-2-years-after-landmark-law-228357/>

¹³⁷ World Watch monitor, 'Egypt: Mob attacks prevent Coptic church's recognition for 'security' reasons', 31 August 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/08/egypt-mob-attacks-prevent-coptic-churchs-recognition-for-security-reasons/>

¹³⁸ World Watch Monitor, 'Copt's fields torched after rumours he was turning his house into a church', 26 June 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/copts-fields-torched-after-rumours-he-was-turning-his-house-into-a-church/>

Blasphemy cases are increasing in Egypt.¹³⁹ Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal code criminalises contempt of religion¹⁴⁰ and acts as a blasphemy law. In December 2017 a 29 year-old man was accused of 'contempt of religion' for running a Facebook page called 'Atheism'.¹⁴¹ In July 2018 a mob attacked several Coptic Christian homes in Minbal village, Minya, following the publication of a Facebook post deemed offensive to Islam.¹⁴² Atheists and adherents of non-recognised religions are barred from registering their chosen belief on ID cards.¹⁴³ Thanks to a 2008 court ruling, official recognition of conversion from Islam is impossible, and those who do in practice face significant social and governmental hostilities.¹⁴⁴ Conversely, official recognition of conversion to Islam is easy to obtain.

Eritrea

Around half of the population of Eritrea are Christians and around half Muslims.¹⁴⁵ Eritrea has long held an ideological antipathy towards all forms of religion, reflecting the state's desire to control every aspect of citizen's lives.¹⁴⁶ The government argues that its actions help maintain religious harmony by ensuring "Islamic or Christian fundamentalism that corrode the social fabric" are not allowed to "perturb" "religious tolerance and harmony".¹⁴⁷ The reality is severe repression of every freedom, including FoRB. USCIRF's Father Thomas Reese told a US Human Rights Commission hearing in April 2018 that Eritrea remained "one of the worst examples of state-sponsored repression of freedom of religion or belief in the world."¹⁴⁸

Religious communities are obliged to register with the government; but four religious groups are exempted and allowed to continue: the Eritrean Orthodox Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. These sanctioned religious groups still face heavy state interference. They are required to submit reports every six months and cannot accept funds from co-religionists abroad.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, the government controls the hiring and firing of Orthodox Church personnel, administers Church finances, sells its assets and appoints its highest administrative officials. Members who oppose government intervention are often arrested or left with no alternative except to flee the country.¹⁵⁰

Non-sanctioned groups are considered illegal. In 2002 the Baha'i community, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists all submitted the required applications, but none have been sanctioned.¹⁵¹ 2017 witnessed a renewed intensity in the crackdown on non-sanctioned churches, including a campaign of house-to-house raids targeting church members in several cities.¹⁵² During the first week of August 2017 alone, 23 Christians were rounded up in Asmara, the capital. Most were detained following raids on their homes, while some were arrested at prayer

¹³⁹ USCIRF, 'Tier 2: Egypt', http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_EGYPT.pdf

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*

¹⁴¹ IHEU, 'Humanists denounce proposed law to criminalize atheism in Egypt', January 2018, <http://iheu.org/humanists-denounce-proposed-law-criminalize-atheism-egypt/>

¹⁴² CSW, 'Egypt: Coptic community attacked following Facebook post', 17 July 2018, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/17/press/4045/article.htm>

¹⁴³ IHEU, 'Freedom of Thought Report 2018', <https://freethoughtreport.com/countries/africa-northern-africa/egypt/>

¹⁴⁴ Open Doors UK, 'Egypt', 2018, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/World-Watch-Fact-Sheets-2018-17.pdf>

¹⁴⁵ USCIRF, Annual Report 2018, <https://www.uscirtf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

¹⁴⁶ CSW and CSW-Nigeria, 'Eritrea: Joint submission to the Universal Periodic Review, 32nd session', July 2018. Pg. 1, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/17/report/4047/article.htm>

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*. Pg. 2.

¹⁴⁸ World Watch Monitor, 'Eritreans still suffering despite peace deal with Ethiopia, says priest', 29 October 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/eritreans-still-suffering-despite-peace-deal-with-ethiopia-says-priest/>

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*. Pg. 41.

¹⁵⁰ CSW, 'Eritrea: Joint submission to the Universal Periodic Review, 32nd session'. *Op cit*. Pg. 3, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/17/report/4047/article.htm>

¹⁵¹ USCIRF. Annual Report 2018, April 2018. Pg. 40, <http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2018USCIRFAR.pdf>

¹⁵² World Watch Research, 'Eritrea country dossier', 2018, Pg.10

meetings. In August 2017 the death was reported of Fikadu Debesay, a Christian mother-of-four detained during the house-to-house raids in Adi Quala in May 2017 and held in a desert camp. She died on her way to hospital following mistreatment, poor conditions and delayed medical assistance.¹⁵³

USCIRF has noted “religious prisoners are routinely sent to the harshest prisons and receive some of the cruellest punishments.”¹⁵⁴ In early 2018, several religious prisoners died in detention, including Haji Musa Mohammed Nur, the nonagenarian Honorary President of Al Diaa Islamic School in Asmara, and Jehovah’s Witnesses Habtemichael Tesfamariam and Habtemichael Mekonen, both detained without charge or trial since 2008.¹⁵⁵

Jehovah’s Witnesses are particularly targeted due to their conscientious objection to the government’s policy of military conscription. At the end of 2017, a total of fifty-five Jehovah’s Witnesses were imprisoned without formal charge or trial.¹⁵⁶ Between November and December 2017, six health centres were closed around the country, simply because they were run by the Catholic Church.¹⁵⁷

Abune (Father) Antonios, the legitimate patriarch of the Orthodox Church, has been under effective house arrest since January 2007 after having been removed from office. He was deemed to be in violation of canon law for repeatedly objecting to government interference in ecclesiastical affairs and refusing to excommunicate members of the Orthodox renewal movement known as Medhanie Alem. On 16 July 2017, he was seen in public for the first time in over a decade. It is widely believed, however, that his tightly-managed appearance was aimed at convincing the international community that the human rights situation was improving in Eritrea, and to convince the Eritrean people that the division caused by the patriarch’s removal was over in order to pave the way for a pro-government successor.¹⁵⁸

In July 2018 35 Christians imprisoned for belonging to unregistered churches were released.¹⁵⁹ It was hoped that this was a positive sign that the thaw in relations with Ethiopia might result in an improvement in human rights in Eritrea. In October 2018, however, an Eritrean priest called on the international community not to close their eyes to the reality of what was happening in his country, emphasising that the harassment of religious groups continues.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵³ CSW and CSW-Nigeria, ‘Eritrea: Joint submission to the Universal Periodic Review, 32nd session’, July 2018. Pg.4. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/17/report/4047/article.htm>

¹⁵⁴ USCIRF. Annual Report 2018, April 2018. Pg. 40, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2018USCIRFAR.pdf>

¹⁵⁵ CSW, ‘Eritrea Two Jehovah Witnesses Die in Prison’, 30 Apr 2018. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/30/press/3939/article.htm>

¹⁵⁶ CSW, ‘Eritrea: Joint submission to the Universal Periodic Review, 32nd session, Pg. 3, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/17/report/4047/article.htm>

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. Pg. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, Pg. 3

¹⁵⁹ Asmarino Independent, ‘Eritrea still holds hundreds of prisoners incarcerated for their religious faith’, 18 July 2018, <http://www.asmarino.com/news/5107-eritrea-still-holds-hundreds-of-prisoners-incarcerated-for-their-religious-faith>

¹⁶⁰ Agenzia Fides, ‘Africa/Eritrea – Fr. Zerai’s alarm: ‘The regime does not reduce pressure: it is a state-prison’, 24 October 2018, http://www.fides.org/en/news/64973-AFRICA_ERITREA_Fr_Zerai_s_alarm_The_regime_does_not_reduce_pressure_it_is_a_State_prison

India

India is a majority Hindu country (approximately 79.8%) with a significant Muslim minority population (14.2%) which, despite its minority status, still amounts to the second largest Muslim population in the world. Christians account for 2.3% of the population, Sikhs account for 1.7% with Buddhists, Jains and others making up the remaining 2% of the population.¹⁶¹

India's Constitution contains some protection for freedom of religion. For instance, Article 25 of the Constitution states that all people have a right to profess, practice and propagate religion. However, the freedom to change one's religion is omitted, and Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are declared to come under the category of 'Hindu'.¹⁶² This denies Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs access to benefits reserved for religious minority groups.¹⁶³

Inter-communal violence has always been a reality in India.¹⁶⁴ However, the rise of nationalist Hindutva ideology¹⁶⁵ – which defines 'Indian' as exclusively Hindu¹⁶⁶ – is leading to increased religious oppression and attacks against minorities.¹⁶⁷ Further, while the constitution declares India to be a secular country, 21 states have custodial sentences for slaughtering the Hindu sacred animal¹⁶⁸ – in Gujarat the sentence for illegal slaughter of cows has been increased from seven years to life imprisonment.¹⁶⁹ This legislation disproportionately affects minority religious groups which tend to eat cheap meat such as beef for added protein in their diets¹⁷⁰, and specifically Muslims working in the cow slaughtering industry, an industry dominated by India's Muslim minority.¹⁷¹ Anti-conversion laws in seven states are also used to threaten Muslims and Christians.¹⁷² These laws require those who convert to seek permission from district magistrates before their conversion or participating in a conversion ceremony and are therefore in direct violation of an individual's right to choose and change their religion. Dalits who identify as Christian or Muslim are also forbidden from accessing educational and employment benefits reserved for Hindu Dalits.¹⁷³ This means that Christian and Muslim Dalits are doubly vulnerable as they suffer persecution for their religion as well as their class.

Prime Minister Modi has, finally, condemned mob violence against minorities,¹⁷⁴ but his government has remained largely inactive in proactively tackling spiralling religiously motivated violence.¹⁷⁵ This is particularly worrying as it is reported that some members of the BJP have close affiliations to the

¹⁶¹ CIA, 'The World Factbook: India', <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>

¹⁶² 1949 Constitution of India, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/India_2016?lang=en

¹⁶³ Pew Research Center, '5 facts about religion in India', 29 June 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/29/5-facts-about-religion-in-india/>

¹⁶⁴ See BRAPO, 'The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India', <https://www.washington.edu/uwpress/search/chapters/BRAPRO.pdf>

¹⁶⁵ Open Doors UK, 'World Watch List 2018', 2018,

https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/resources/world_watch_list_report_2018_final.pdf p. 9

¹⁶⁶ Britannica Encyclopaedia, 'Hindutva', <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hindutva>

¹⁶⁷ Open Doors UK, 'World Watch List 2018', 2018,

https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/resources/world_watch_list_report_2018_final.pdf p. 9

¹⁶⁸ Pew Research Center, 29 June 2018, '5 Facts about religion in India', <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/29/5-facts-about-religion-in-india/>

¹⁶⁹ BBC News, 'Gujarat: India state approves life term for killing cows', 31 March 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-39454607>

¹⁷⁰ The Guardian, 'Indian beef ban will cost jobs and harm economy, warn critics', 23 March 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/23/india-beef-ban-jobs-economy-maharashtra-cows>

¹⁷¹ Wilkes, T., Bhardwaj, M., 'Cattle slaughter crackdown ripples through India's leather industry', Reuters, 14 June 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-politics-religion-insight-idUSKBN19510E>

¹⁷² ADF International, 'India and its anti-conversion laws', 12 April 2018, <https://adfinternational.org/commentary/india-and-its-anti-conversion-laws/>

¹⁷³ Pew Research Center, '5 facts about religion in India', 29 June 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/29/5-facts-about-religion-in-india/>

¹⁷⁴ World Watch Monitor, 'Modi speaks out against 'menace of mob attacks for first time'', August 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/08/modi-speaks-out-against-menace-of-mob-attacks-for-first-time/>

¹⁷⁵ USCIRF, 'Tier 2: India', 2018, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_INDIA.pdf

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh,¹⁷⁶ a Hindu nationalist group whose members have stated that they want to see India free of Muslims and Christians by 2021.¹⁷⁷ There have also been moves to re-write the history of the nation to portray it as more homogenous¹⁷⁸ and change the education system¹⁷⁹ in the name of promoting the Hindutva ideology.

In July 2018, 32 million individuals, mostly Muslims of Bengali descent, were asked by the NRC to apply for recognition as Indian citizens. Of the 32 million, over 4 million have been rejected and have been stripped of their citizenship.¹⁸⁰ Officials explained this as an attempt to curb illegal immigration, but many assess it to be a campaign to further disenfranchise the Muslim community.¹⁸¹

There is a high level of religiously motivated social hostility¹⁸² and attacks taking place with impunity in India.¹⁸³ In January 2018 a mob attacked a man on suspicion of possessing beef, highlighting the ongoing existence of cow vigilantism by some groups.¹⁸⁴ Local groups conduct 'homecoming' *ghar wapsi* ceremonies to forcibly convert non-Hindus to Hinduism. These ceremonies have sometimes been directly or indirectly supported by senior officials.¹⁸⁵ Converts from Hinduism are expelled from their villages or denied access to local amenities.¹⁸⁶ Between June and August 2018, a dozen houses belonging to Christians were attacked by Hindu extremists in Maharashtra and many Christians in the state have been told that if they pursue the Christian faith they will be cut off from local utilities and lose their access to government-subsidized groceries.¹⁸⁷

From January-June 2018 there were 362 recorded religiously motivated attacks against Christians.¹⁸⁸ From 2011-2016 there were 4,000 such attacks against Muslims.¹⁸⁹ In July 2018, 20 men attacked Yeshu Darbar Church in Uttar Pradesh. They belonged to a youth militia group which defends the Hindutva ideology and was established by the current Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.¹⁹⁰ Muslim homes and businesses were attacked, looted and burned en-masse in religiously motivated attacks during the Hindu festival of Ramanavami in Bihar and West Bengal.¹⁹¹

¹⁷⁶ The Telegraph India, 'Survey: Bihar tops hate-speech list', 10 July 2018, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/bihar/survey-bihar-tops-hate-speech-list-243640>

¹⁷⁷ Firstpost, 'Bye, bye ghar waspi? RSS dumps Rajeshwar Singh after Modi meet', 2 January 2015, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/bye-bye-ghar-wapsi-rss-dumps-rajeshwar-singh-after-modi-meet-2026443.html>

¹⁷⁸ Reuters, 'By rewriting history, Hindu nationalists aim to assert their dominance over India', 6 March 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/india-modi-culture/>

¹⁷⁹ Huffington Post, 'RSS brings together VCs of 51 Universities to discuss 'nationalist narrative' in education', 27 March 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/03/27/rss-brings-together-vcs-of-51-universities-to-discuss-nationali_a_22013710?utm_hp_ref=in-saffronisation-of-education

¹⁸⁰ Deutsche Welle, 'India strips 4 million people of citizenship in Assam', 30 July 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-strips-4-million-people-of-citizenship-in-assam/a-44875559>

¹⁸¹ The Telegraph, 'India strips four million people of citizenship in Assam as Modi's BJP 'targets' Muslim minority', 30 July 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/07/30/india-strips-four-million-people-citizenship-assam-modis-bjp/>

¹⁸² Pew Research Center, '5 facts about religion in India', 29 June 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/29/5-facts-about-religion-in-india/>

¹⁸³ World Watch Monitor, 'We'll close one church every week, Indian Christians told', 6 August 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/08/well-close-one-church-every-week-indian-christians-told/>

¹⁸⁴ The Economist, 'Cow vigilantism in India', 15 February 2018, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/02/15/cow-vigilantism-in-india>

¹⁸⁵ Open Doors UK, 'Firebrand appointed chief minister in Uttar Pradesh', 28 March 2017, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/india-170328/>

¹⁸⁶ World Watch Monitor, 'We'll close one church every week, Indian Christians told', 6 Aug. 2018,

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/08/well-close-one-church-every-week-indian-christians-told/>

¹⁸⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸⁸ Source: Open Doors

¹⁸⁹ The Spectator, 'When will the West take a stand on the persecution of Muslims', March 2018, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/03/when-will-the-west-take-a-stand-on-the-persecution-of-muslims/>

¹⁹⁰ CSW, 'India: Hindu radicals disrupt prayer meeting', 9 July 2018, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/09/press/4028/article.htm>

¹⁹¹ Al-Jazeera, 'How India's institutions are failing Muslims', 3 May 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-institutions-failing-muslims-180502100321517.html>

Sikhs have both historic and current issues affecting their religious freedoms and equality as a minority community within India. There are long standing issues and grievances between the Sikhs and the Indian government. The most recent traumatic events are the wide-scale systematic and deliberate killing of an estimated 30,000 Sikhs (most burnt alive) in November 1984 in 18 states and over 130 cities across India.¹⁹² The 10 years following the 1984 genocides saw over 250,000 Sikhs illegally detained, tortured, disappeared and killed in extra judicial killings and fake encounters by the Punjab Police.¹⁹³ 34 years later there have been no independent inquiries in India – including into Operation Bluestar and Woodrose led by the Indian military in 1984 - or what has followed. It was only on 28 November 2018 that the Delhi High Court pronounced the Sikh pogrom in 1984 a “genocide” and brought punishment to 89 arsonists involved in the killings.¹⁹⁴ No senior members involved in the 1984 killings have been brought to justice.¹⁹⁵

The passage of time has done little to heal wounds and issues for the Sikh community continue. Routine cases of torture carried out on the Sikh community by the Indian police,¹⁹⁶ targeted arrests and torture towards human rights activists,¹⁹⁷ and a failure to respond to regular acts of desecration of the Sikh holy scriptures and the Guru Granth Sahib have been reported.¹⁹⁸ In November 2017, British-born Sikh activist Scott Jagtar Singh Johal was taken by plain clothes officers 2 weeks after his wedding in India.¹⁹⁹ His lawyer states that he has been subject to torture while imprisoned but a medical assessment has been denied and he has still not been charged despite 3 UN rapporteurs writing to the State of India.²⁰⁰

Minority women are especially vulnerable due to their religious identity. In January 2018 an eight-year-old Muslim girl was abducted, raped and murdered by eight Hindu men in the Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir.²⁰¹ In August 2018, a nine-year-old Christian girl was also reported to have been gang-raped then murdered in Gurdaspur, Punjab. Her parents had recently converted from Hinduism to Christianity and local Christians interpreted her brutal murder as a warning to others who might consider changing their religion to Christianity.²⁰²

¹⁹² Information provided by The Sikh Network UK; The Times of India, ‘Pennsylvania recognises 1984 riots as ‘Sikh genocide’, 20 Oct. 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/amritsar/pennsylvania-recognizes-1984-riots-as-sikh-genocide/articleshow/66291925.cms>

¹⁹³ House of Representatives, ‘Khalistani Delegation Testifies at United Nations – Hon. Dan Burton’ 6 Aug. 1998, https://fas.org/irp/congress/1998_cr/h980807-khalistan.htm

¹⁹⁴ NewsClick, ‘1984 Pogrom was a Genocide Says Delhi High Court’, 3 Dec. 2018, <https://www.newsclick.in/1984-pogrom-was-genocide-says-delhi-high-court>

¹⁹⁵ Hindustan Times, ‘Supreme Court Seeks Response from Sajjan Kumar in 1984 anti-Sikh riot cases’, 5 July 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/supreme-court-seeks-response-from-sajjan-kumar-in-1984-anti-sikh-riots-cases/story-2r1FxZw9cuGYQkhamGWZsO.html>

¹⁹⁶ Asian Centre of Human Rights, ‘India Torture Update: Punjab’, July 2018, <http://www.achrweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/IndiaTortureUpdatePunjab.pdf>

¹⁹⁷ Huffington Post, ‘Three Years Later’, 14 January 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/three-years-later-india-continues-to-ignore-the-plight_us_5a5b8a7ee4b003efadb6aef1?guccounter=1

¹⁹⁸ First Post, ‘Guru Granth Sahib Desecration in Punjab’, 21 Nov. 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/guru-granth-sahib-desecration-in-punjab-scores-of-sacrilege-incidents-high-profile-accused-political-blame-galore-5590651.html>

¹⁹⁹ BBC News, ‘Torture claims over Scottish activist held in India’, 14 Nov. 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-41984339>

²⁰⁰ Sikh Press Association, ‘Latest Updates’, 25 July 2018, <https://www.sikhpa.com/freejagginow/>; Redress, ‘Jagtar Singh Johal’, 9 June 2018, <https://redress.org/news/jagtar-singh-johal-india-fails-to-respond-to-un-experts-as-new-details-of-his-alleged-torture-emerge/>

²⁰¹ Al-Jazeera, ‘How India’s institutions are failing Muslims’, 3 May 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-institutions-failing-muslims-180502100321517.html>

²⁰² Open Doors UK, ‘India: Nine-year-old who was raped and murdered was targeted for her faith’, 14 August 2018, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/india-180814/>

Indonesia

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. Its religious minorities are comprised of a significant Christian population and smaller communities of Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, Ahmadis, traditional beliefs and those of non-belief.²⁰³ With a population of around 263 million, and 87.2% of the population being Muslim, Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims globally.²⁰⁴ Around 7% of the remaining population are Protestant, 2.9% are Catholic, 1.7% are Hindu and the remaining 0.9% are Buddhist, Confucian or follow another belief.²⁰⁵

The constitution protects the rights to freedom of conscience and expression and the freedom to practice the religion of one's choice. However, these protections are only accorded to six recognised 'religions': Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism.²⁰⁶ In November 2017 the Constitutional Court affirmed the rights of followers of traditional beliefs, but the government delayed implementing this ruling.²⁰⁷ Identity documents must show an authorised religion, causing difficulties for those from unrecognised groups to access them.²⁰⁸

Articles 156 and 156(a) of Indonesia's penal code criminalise blasphemy; the 2006 Joint Regulation on Houses of Worship and 2008 anti-Ahmadiyya Joint Decree further restrict religious freedom.²⁰⁹ The government rejected recommendations made during its last Universal Periodic Review to repeal the blasphemy law²¹⁰ and in July 2018 the Constitutional Court dismissed a petition brought by nine Ahmadis to do the same.²¹¹ A student currently faces up to five years in prison on blasphemy charges for a Facebook post questioning the Koran and comparing Allah to Greek gods.²¹² In August 2018 a Buddhist woman in North Sumatra was sentenced to 18 months in prison on charges of blasphemy for complaining about the noise levels coming from a local mosque.²¹³ A High Court in Medan upheld that sentence in October.²¹⁴

Hard-line Islamist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) are actively involved in Indonesia's politics. FPI organised protests against the Christian former Governor of Jakarta, Ahok, who was sentenced to two years in prison in 2017 for allegedly criticising the use of the Koran for political purposes. When he appealed against his conviction in February 2018,²¹⁵ an FPI spokesperson warned that overturning the verdict would offend Indonesia's Muslims, cause political unrest in the 2019

²⁰³ USCIRF, 'Tier 2: Indonesia', 2018, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_INDONESIA.pdf

²⁰⁴ CIA, 'The world factbook: Indonesia', <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/id.html>

²⁰⁵ *ibid*

²⁰⁶ US Department of State, 'Indonesia', <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148869.htm>

²⁰⁷ The New York Times, 'Indonesia's ancient beliefs win in court, but devotees still feel ostracised', 14 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/world/asia/indonesia-religious-freedom.html>

²⁰⁸ House of Commons Library, 'Persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community', 22 May 2018, <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2018-0129/CDP-2018-0129.pdf>

²⁰⁹ CSW, 'Indonesia', 2017, <https://docs-eu.livesiteadmin.com/dc3e323f-351c-4172-800e-4e02848abf80/2017-07-indonesia.pdf>

²¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, 'Why Indonesia's Christian diaspora fears going home', 1 March 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/01/why-indonesias-christian-diaspora-fears-going-home>

²¹¹ Human Rights Watch, 'Indonesia's blasphemy law survives court challenge', 26 July 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/26/indonesias-blasphemy-law-survives-court-challenge>

²¹² The Jakarta Post, 'Living a double life: Indonesia's atheists fear jail or worse', 11 July 2018, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/07/11/living-a-double-life-indonesias-atheists-fear-jail-or-worse.html>

²¹³ The Independent, 'Woman who complained about noisy mosque jailed for blaphemy', 21 August 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-woman-jailed-insulting-islam-mosque-buddhist-meiliana-a8501191.html>

²¹⁴ MSN, 'High court denies appeal against prison sentence by Indonesian woman in mosque loudspeaker blasphemy case', 10 Oct. 2018, <https://www.msn.com/en-sg/news/world/high-court-denies-appeal-against-prison-sentence-by-indonesian-woman-in-mosque-loudspeaker-blasphemy-case/ar-BBOUVvK?li=BBR8YXK&c=9651852693262714368&mkt=en-us>

²¹⁵ World Watch Monitor, 'Indonesia: Ahok asks supreme court to review his blasphemy sentence', 21 February 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/02/indonesia-ahok-asks-supreme-court-to-review-his-blasphemy-sentence/>

elections and further divide the nation.²¹⁶ The current President's Vice-Presidential running mate, Ma'ruf Amin, is known for helping to draft and vocally support fatwas against the rights of religious minorities.²¹⁷

Provincial and local governments and law enforcement often heighten divisions and fail to prevent religious-based discrimination, with Aceh, West Java, and South Sulawesi seeing the highest levels of religious hostility.²¹⁸ Sharia is practiced as law in semi-autonomous Aceh. Although it initially only applied to Muslims, it was widened to include people of all religions in 2013. In March 2018 two Christians were whipped for taking part in a children's game deemed tantamount to gambling²¹⁹ and in January a Christian was whipped for selling alcohol.²²⁰ Buddhists were whipped for the first time in 2017 after being accused of cockfighting.²²¹

Non-state actors are responsible for the highest number of religious freedom violations, committing harassment, intimidation and violence.²²² Christian and Ahmadi places of worship have been closed²²³ and their communities attacked, and the National Anti-Shia Alliance has made public statements against Shias.²²⁴ Mob violence on Lombok in 2018 destroyed Ahmadi homes, forcing dozens to flee.²²⁵ In February 2018 a man attacked a church, injuring four people.²²⁶ In May one Islamist family committed suicide bombings at three churches in Surabaya, the capital of East Java, killing 13.²²⁷

Iran

Iran remains a country of concern for human rights in general. It is a heterogeneous state, made up of over 81 million inhabitants. Over 99% of the population are Muslim (c.90% Shi'a, c.9% Sunni) with the rest (<1%) comprising of Christians, Baha'i, Jews, Zoroastrians, Sufi-Dervishes, Mandaeans and others.²²⁸ The substantive and wide-ranging denial of freedom of religion or belief to members of

²¹⁶ Benar News, 'Indonesia: Panel to conduct review into Ahok's conviction', 20 February 2018, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/judicial-review-02202018164254.html>

²¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, 'Indonesia: Vice Presidential candidate has anti-rights record', 10 August 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/10/indonesia-vice-presidential-candidate-has-anti-rights-record>

²¹⁸ USCIRF, 'Tier 2: Indonesia', http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_INDONESIA.pdf

²¹⁹ World Watch Monitor, 'Indonesia Christians' whipping a rare example of non-Muslims punished under Sharia', 2 March 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/03/indonesia-christians-whipping-rare-example-non-muslims-punished-sharia/>

²²⁰ Independent, 'Christians in Indonesia publicly flogged for selling alcohol in Sharia law breach', 20 January 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/indonesia-sharia-law-public-whipping-flogging-jono-simbolon-banda-aceh-a8169756.html>

²²¹ The Straits Times, 'Indonesian Buddhists caned under syariah for first time', 11 March 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-buddhists-caned-under-syariah-for-first-time>

²²² World Watch Monitor, 'Non-state actors behind most religious freedom violations in Indonesia- report', 14 August 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/non-state-actors-behind-most-religious-freedom-violations-in-indonesia-report/>

²²³ World Watch Monitor, 'Indonesia's religious minorities protest against closure of worship places', 1 August 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/indonesias-religious-minorities-protest-against-closure-of-worship-places/>

²²⁴ Asia Times, 'No safe place for SEAsia's Shia Muslims', 3 February 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/article/no-safe-place-seasias-shia-muslims/>

²²⁵ The Jakarta Post, 'Living a double life: Indonesia's atheists fear jail or worse', 11 July 2018, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/07/11/living-a-double-life-indonesias-atheists-fear-jail-or-worse.html>

²²⁶ Open Doors UK, 'Pastor, church members and police officer injured in church attack in Indonesia', 13 February 2018, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/indonesia-180213/>

²²⁷ Open Doors UK, 'One family bombs three churches in Indonesia – our brothers and sisters need their global church family', 14 May 2018, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/indonesia-180514/>

²²⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, 'The World Factbook: Middle East: Iran', <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>

recognised and non-recognised religious communities, as well as secular or atheist Iranians, should merit particular focus for the FCO in view of the objective set out in the 2016 human rights report.²²⁹

The Iranian Constitution declares Twelver Ja'fari Shi'ism the official religion²³⁰ and consolidates the Shi'a clergy's hold over the levers of power, leaving little room for Iranian citizens with other beliefs. The Constitution declares Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians as the 'only recognised religious minorities', in turn, condemning other minority believers, such as Baha'is, as 'non-citizens', unentitled to State protection. The 'Revolutionary Courts' established post-1979 to try so-called 'political crimes' have to power try individuals, including 'apostates', on vague charges of being 'un-Islamic' and threatening 'national security'. Article 260 of the Penal Code codifies the death penalty for blasphemy, a so-called crime which includes 'insulting the Prophet', 'other Prophets' or "the sacred values of Islam.

During the reporting period Sunni Muslims, of which there are between 4 to 8 million,²³¹ experienced discrimination in employment and political leadership. There are reportedly 140 Sunni Muslims currently detained on charges relating to their beliefs or religious practices, and they are also facing harsh treatment in prison because of their religious practices. Members of the Sufi and Dervish communities have also continued to face persecution, including attacks on their prayer centres, expulsion from educational institutions, physical assaults and arrests. According to reports, dozens have been detained over the past year, and their communities are targeted for "following a deviant sect"²³²

Atheists and secularists expressing non-religious views have been severely persecuted and rendered practically voiceless due to severe social stigma; they are met with hatred or violence. It is illegal to declare oneself to be an atheist or non-religious. One case that is illustrative of the wider issue is that of Sina Dehghan, who was sentenced to death in 2017 for allegedly insulting Islam in private messages he had shared over an instant messaging app, when aged 17.²³³

The persecution of Christians, of which there are thought to be nearly 300,000 'historic', officially recognised Christians, such as Armenians and Assyrians, has been continuous, systematic, and institutionalised in the last year. There are estimated to be a similar number of 'un-official' Christians – at least 200,000. In particular, Christian converts from Islam have been targeted by the Iranian authorities. Throughout the year, government-controlled or sponsored media outlets continued to spread anti-Christian sentiment, while anti-Christian publications proliferated online and in print. In this reporting period, at least 52 Christians were arrested.²³⁴ In July 2018, the detention and use of violence against Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani,²³⁵ a leading member of the house church movement, was reported. His case has become symbolic of the abuses directed at unrecognised churches in Iran.

The 2017 human rights report highlighted the discrimination against the Bahá'í community, of which there are around 300,000.²³⁶ The late Asma Jahangir, UN Special Rapporteur on Iran, in her 2016 report to the General Assembly, raised concerns about the treatment of Bahá'ís in 4 operative

²²⁹ From Annex A to "Championing the promotion and protection of FoRB for all individuals in the Middle East and globally"

²³⁰ Islamic Republic of Iran, supra n.60, Article.12

²³¹ USCIRF, 'Tier 1: Iran', http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_IRAN.pdf

²³² Ibid

²³³ For more information see: <http://freethoughtreport.com/countries/asia-southern-asia/iran/>

²³⁴ Open Doors, 'Iran', 2018, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/World-Watch-Fact-Sheets-2018-10.pdf>

²³⁵ CSW, 'Iranian Pastor Nadarkhani arrested in violent raid', 23 July 2018, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/23/press/4050/article.htm>

²³⁶ For details see:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/725552/FCO1124_Human_Rights_Report_2017_ONLINE.PDF

paragraphs. This includes reports of 72 Bahá'is detained as of June 2016, and continuing denial of their right to work.²³⁷ Access to higher education is also repeatedly denied to Bahá'is as a matter of policy.²³⁸

Bahá'is are not recognised under the Iranian Constitution. The official policy of the Iranian government is to ensure that their “progress and development are blocked”²³⁹ – which includes, *inter alia*, being denied access to education and economic opportunities, facing arbitrary detentions, being victims of incitement to hatred and violence, and the desecration of Bahá'í cemeteries.

Iraq

Iraq is a majority Muslim country divided between 55–60% Shia and 40–45% Sunni Islam.²⁴⁰ Once famed for its religious diversity, decades of war and sectarian violence have decimated the country and now less than 1% of the population follow other faiths.²⁴¹ These include Christians, Yazidis, Sabeen-Mandaeans, and a number of other very small, diverse communities.

The most severe religious persecution of recent years was meted out by Daesh, which caused mass displacement and inflamed sectarian tensions. Their campaign against the Yazidis was labelled genocide by the United Nations,²⁴² and there have been calls to extend the definition of genocide to Daesh's actions against Christians.²⁴³ Reprisal killings of Sunni Muslims presumed to be Daesh supporters have been reported,²⁴⁴ and there remains serious concern about the impact of residual support for Daesh's ideology in Mosul and surrounding areas.²⁴⁵

While there are also some positive instances of Muslims and Christians working together post-Daesh,²⁴⁶ and the churches working together through the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee (Chaldean, Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic) report that 45% of their families have returned to the region.²⁴⁷ Nevertheless many Christians and Yazidis still do not feel it safe to return to their home towns due to heightened sectarian tension and fear of the continued presence and resurgence of Daesh.²⁴⁸ Reports of harassment from local authorities, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Peshmerga, Asayish and Popular Mobilisation Forces continue.²⁴⁹ All this in addition to the significant

²³⁷ see operative paragraphs 71, 72, 73, 74 of Section C of the Special Rapporteur's report to the General Assembly 2016, here: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N16/304/01/PDF/N1630401.pdf?OpenElement>

²³⁸ Ochab, E., 'Discrimination or a subtle and slow but steady persecution of Baha'is in Iran?', 24 July 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2018/07/24/discrimination-or-a-subtle-and-slow-but-steady-persecution-of-bahais-in-iran/#e8d74cd40004>

²³⁹ Bahai.org, 'The 1991 memorandum on 'The Baha'i Question'', 1991, <http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/yaran-special-report/feature-articles/the-1991-memorandum-on-the-bahai-question>

²⁴⁰ USCIRF, 'Tier 2: Iraq', http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_IRAQ.pdf

²⁴¹ *ibid*

²⁴² Minority Rights Group, 'Iraq: Yazidis', November 2017, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/yezidis/>

²⁴³ Aid to the Church in Need UK, 'Persecuted and Forgotten? A report on Christians oppressed for their faith 2015-2017', 2017, <https://acnuk.org/iraq/>

²⁴⁴ USCIRF, 'Tier 2: Iraq', http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_IRAQ.pdf

²⁴⁵ Independent, 'ISIS may have been defeated a year ago in Mosul, but the ideology that caused it to grow lives on', 11 July 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/Daesh-mosul-defeat-ideology-region-islamic-fundamentalism-a8442026.html>

²⁴⁶ World Watch Monitor, 'Muslims and Christians unite to restore ancient Iraqi church', 14 June 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/muslims-and-christians-unite-to-restore-ancient-iraqi-church/>

²⁴⁷ Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, 'Reconstruction Process', November 2018 <https://www.nrciraq.org/reconstruction-process/>

²⁴⁸ World Watch Monitor, 'Nineveh Plains Christians 'slowly returning to normal'', 8 August 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/nineveh-plains-christians-slowly-returning-to-normal>

²⁴⁹ US State Dept, 'Iraq: 2017', <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281228.pdf>

infrastructure renewal and rebuilding – and therefore funding – which is still required to enable all those able and wishing to return to their home towns to do so.²⁵⁰

Violence against minorities recurred in Baghdad.²⁵¹ Sabean-Mandaeans experienced attacks and kidnappings, and face ongoing discrimination and negative stereotyping in all aspects of public life.²⁵² Nineveh remains on the fault-lines of tensions between Baghdad and the KRG, with Christians caught in the middle²⁵³ and vulnerable to the actions of active sectarian militias.²⁵⁴ Christians accused Baghdad of providing land and housing for Shias to move into traditionally Christian areas, thereby changing the local power dynamics.²⁵⁵

The KRG has made repeated statements affirming the integration of religious minority communities, whereas the Iraqi government remains more ambivalent.²⁵⁶ The Iraqi constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice for Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and Sabean-Mandaeans only. It also affirms Islam as the official religion, stating that no law may be enacted contradicting the “established provisions of Islam.”²⁵⁷ Article 372 of the Iraqi Penal Code punishes blasphemy with up to three years in prison.²⁵⁸

Conversion from Islam is not recognised by law and it impossible to change the religious affiliation shown on identity cards from Islam. Children of converts from Islam either remain unregistered or are required to be registered as Muslim.²⁵⁹ Islamic leaders, clan leaders, extended family and ordinary citizens put pressure on people who convert from Islam to recant, sometimes using torture or physical attack. These converts risk harassment or discrimination at check-points, universities, work places and government buildings; they may also lose jobs, inheritance rights, or the ability to marry.²⁶⁰

Iraqi legislation continues to be heavily weighted against the non-religious. They are barred from registering as non-religious on their ID cards and from holding government office. It is still illegal to register a secularist, humanist, atheist or non-religious NGO. Arrest warrants were issued in March 2018 for four Iraqis on atheism charges. They were targeted for “holding seminars during social gatherings to promote the idea of the nonexistence of God and to spread and popularise atheism.”²⁶¹

²⁵⁰ IMMAP-IHF, ‘iMMAP-IHF, Humanitarian Access Response Monthly Security Incidents Situation Report’, October 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/immap-ihf_humanitarian_access_response_-_monthly_security_incidents_situation_report_oct_2018.pdf

²⁵¹ World Watch Monitor, ‘Iraq: Christian family stabbed to death in Baghdad’, 12 March 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/03/iraq-christian-doctor-and-family-stabbed-to-death-in-baghdad/>

²⁵² Minority Rights Group, ‘Iraq: Sabian Mandeans’, November 2017, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/sabian-mandaeans/>

²⁵³ CSW, ‘Iraq Christians forced to flee Teleskuf’, 26 October 2017, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2017/10/26/press/3766/article.htm>

²⁵⁴ Persecution.org, ‘Consequences of southern protests felt across Iraq’s Nineveh plains’, 16 July 2018, <https://www.persecution.org/2018/07/16/consequences-southern-protests-felt-across-iraqs-nineveh-plains/>

²⁵⁵ US State Dept, ‘Iraq: 2017’, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281228.pdf>

²⁵⁶ USCIRF, ‘Tier 2: Iraq’, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_IRAQ.pdf

²⁵⁷ US State Dept, ‘Iraq: 2017’, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281228.pdf>

²⁵⁸ End Blasphemy Laws, ‘Iraq’, August 2016, <https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq/>

²⁵⁹ Home Office, ‘Country Info. & Guidance: Iraq’, August 2016, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565848/CIG-Iraq-religious-minorities-v1-August-2016.pdf

²⁶⁰ Open Doors, ‘Iraq’, 2018, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/iraq/>

²⁶¹ Al-Monitor, ‘Iraqi courts seeking out atheists for prosecution’, 1 April 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/atheists-iraq-human-rights.html>

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has over 18 million people, who are about two-thirds ethnic Kazakh (widely regarded as of Muslim background) with the rest including ethnic Slavs (mainly Russians, widely regarded as of Christian background) and ethnic Uzbeks (widely regarded as of Muslim background)²⁶². Serious systemic violations of many human rights take place in the country²⁶³. 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, and objects such as Russian Orthodox icons - including strict limits on where they can be bought or given away, which are enforced with police raids. Religious communities of fewer than 50 people are illegal; at least 50 are needed to be able to register a local group. All discussion of faith by people without state permission, or not using state-approved texts, or outside state-approved locations, is banned.²⁶⁴

From January to December 2017, at least 279 individuals, religious communities, charities and companies were prosecuted for exercising freedom of religion and belief. The offences prosecuted included meeting for worship without state permission, offering religious literature, icons or other items without state permission, and Muslims praying in mosques in banned ways such as saying the word 'Amen' aloud. Punishments included fines, one three-day jail sentence for refusing to pay an earlier fine, temporary or permanent bans on activity (including bans on entire communities meeting for worship), two deportations, and confiscation and destruction of religious literature. Over 50 fines were imposed by police without a court hearing. Fines normally accompany raids on meetings by police and other officials, with all the participants being questioned and some being fined between three weeks' to six months' average wages.²⁶⁵ At least 79 such punishments are known to have happened in the first half of 2018.²⁶⁶

Prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief are primarily alleged adherents of Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat.²⁶⁷ Independent observers in the country state that its activities peacefully encourage greater Muslim religious observance. The regime has repeatedly refused to explain what, if any, crime the alleged Tabligh Jamaat adherents have committed, one verdict claiming the movement is "intolerant" towards Shia Islam – even though the regime itself has banned all Shia mosques and literature.²⁶⁸ Previous such prisoners of conscience have included a Presbyterian pastor and an atheist writer both sent to a psychiatric hospital, because – as one doctor stated – "you are an inconvenient person for the authorities".²⁶⁹

A draft law is now going through the unelected parliament, imposing among other things: more restrictions on parents' and children's freedom to attend worship meetings and teach beliefs; more restrictions on and punishments for religious teaching without state permission; more restrictions on

²⁶² Forum 18's reports on particular freedom of religion and belief violations in Kazakhstan can be found here: <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=29> and Forum 18's September 2018 Kazakhstan religious freedom survey can be found here: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2409

²⁶³ Human Rights Watch, 'Kazakhstan: events of 2017', 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/kazakhstan>

²⁶⁴ Forum 18, 'Kazakhstan: religious freedom survey', September 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2409

²⁶⁵ Forum 18, 'Kazakhstan: 284 administrative prosecutions in 2017', 31 January 2018

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2348

²⁶⁶ Forum 18, 'Kazakhstan: 79 known administrative prosecutions in six months', 4 July 2018

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2392

²⁶⁷ Forum 18, 'Kazakhstan: Five more Sunni Muslim "missionaries" imprisoned', 9 January 2017

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2245

²⁶⁸ Forum 18, 'Kazakhstan: Now 30 Sunni Muslims convicted since December 2014, KNB secret police spy', 22 April 2016

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2170

²⁶⁹ Forum 18 'Kazakhstan: religious freedom survey' September 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2409

sharing beliefs; and apparently increased, but vaguely defined, confiscation of religious literature which does not pass the compulsory state censorship. The regime claims that people who exercise freedom of religion and belief without state permission are a “risk group” who may get involved in “terrorism”.²⁷⁰

Republic of Maldives

The constitution designates Islam as the state religion, requires citizens to be Muslim, and requires public office holders, including the president, to be followers of the Sunni school of Islam. The constitution provides for limitations on rights and freedoms “to protect and maintain the tenets of Islam.” The law states both the government and the people must protect religious unity. Propagation of any religion other than Islam is a criminal offence.²⁷¹ While the Maldivian constitution provides equal human rights for all, it is noticeable that the constitution’s non-discrimination chapter notes that citizens should not experience discrimination on the basis of ‘race, national origin, colour, sex, age, mental or physical disability, political or other opinion, property, birth or other status, or native island’ but does not include religion. Human rights are only a reality in the Maldives in so far as they are compatible with Sunni Islam, the state’s majority faith.²⁷²

The constitution states that only Muslims can become Maldivian citizens, and the state deals with those who choose to utilise their Article 18 human right to change their religion by withdrawing citizenship from them. There is also the remit within Maldivian law for apostasy to be punishable by death.²⁷³ It is because of this that converts to Christianity have to exercise the utmost care to hide their faith and hide Christian materials from their families.²⁷⁴

In terms of religious practice, it is illegal in the Maldives to propagate any religion other than Sunni Islam. It is also illegal to carry non-Islamic religious books and writings in public and to translate non-Islamic religious writings into the Maldivian vernacular, Dhivehi.²⁷⁵

The country’s strict religious laws are a particular concern for the significant number of migrant workers in the Maldives.²⁷⁶ Many of these are Bangladeshi and Indian men working in the construction and service industry, with some workers from Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal also present.²⁷⁷ Those from countries where the practice of non-Muslim religions is prevalent are at risk of being accused of blasphemy or illegal proselytizing.²⁷⁸ Christian migrant workers have reported the lack of space for worshipping together due to the fear of arrest and deportation.²⁷⁹

Those who question religious belief are also at risk. Shahindha Ismail, executive director of the Maldives Democracy Network, is currently under investigation for blasphemy after posting a tweet challenging former President Abdulla Yameen’s comments that his government would not allow any

²⁷⁰ Forum 18, ‘Kazakhstan: Senate approves more religious freedom restrictions’, 28 September 2018

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2419

²⁷¹ US Department of State, ‘Maldives 2016 International Religious Freedom Report’, 2016,

<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269180.pdf>

²⁷² Human Rights Without Frontiers International, ‘Religious Freedom in the Maldives: present and future challenges’. July 2017.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ World Watch Research, ‘Maldives: Country Dossiers’, May 2018, p.12.

²⁷⁵ Human Rights Without Frontiers International, ‘Religious Freedom in the Maldives: present and future challenges’, July 2017,

<https://hrwf.eu/religious-freedom-in-the-maldives-present-and-future-challenges/>

²⁷⁶ U.S. Department of State, ‘Trafficking in Persons report 2017’ 2017, p.269, <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2017/>

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ World Watch Research, ‘Maldives: Country Dossiers’, May 2018, p.12.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, p.8.

other religion in the Maldives other than Islam.²⁸⁰ The observatory for the protection of human rights' defenders believes she could face a five-year prison sentence if convicted.²⁸¹

Those who speak out against the practices of the Maldivian state are publicly criticised by the government. For instance, the United Nation's Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr. Ahmad Shaheed, has been accused by the outgoing President of spreading 'evil deeds' amongst Maldivians for his work encouraging the international right to freedom of religion or belief around the world.²⁸²

Much of this intolerance is derived from the growing extremism present in the Maldives. The political elite has increasingly associated with a hard-line interpretation of Sharia since President Abdulla Yameen came to power in 2013.²⁸³ Radical Islam has been growing in the Maldives as youths are sent to more radical Madrasas in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The radicalisation of the country's future elites poses a serious threat to the future of FoRB in the country.²⁸⁴ By some accounts, with 200 Maldivians recruits, it is the country which has supplied the world's highest per-capita number of foreign fighters to extremist groups in Syria and Iraq.²⁸⁵

The newly-elected President, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, stated during his campaign that he would promote human rights and follow the rule of law if elected;²⁸⁶ it remains to be seen whether this will have any immediate impact on FoRB in the Maldives.

Nigeria

50 % of Nigeria's population is estimated to be Muslim, and a further 40 % are Christians. The remaining 10 % hold indigenous beliefs.²⁸⁷

Nigeria's federal constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief to all citizens. However, violations of the right to FoRB have occurred for decades, and the situation of indigenous ethno-religious minorities in central Nigeria has deteriorated significantly since 2015.

The southern part of Nigeria is predominantly inhabited by Christians, while northern Nigeria is mainly inhabited by Muslims.²⁸⁸ However, both regions have significant numbers of Muslims and non-Muslims respectively. In states which have adopted Sharia law, non-Muslims continue to report being denied the rights, opportunities, provisions and protections afforded to Muslims, and to which they

²⁸⁰ World Watch Monitor, 'Maldives activist investigated for 'blasphemy' over 'religion other than Islam' tweet', 8 January, 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/-maldives-activist-investigated-blasphemy-religions-tweet/>

²⁸¹ World Organisation Against Torture, 'Maldives: Death threats and harassment against Ms. Shahindha Ismail'. 5 January, 2018, <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/maldives-death-threats-and-harassment-against-ms-shahindha-ismail>

²⁸² USCIRF, 'Maldives: Maldives ruling party should repudiate attacks on UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief'. July 20, 2017, <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases/maldives-maldives-ruling-party-should-repudiate-attacks-un-special>

²⁸³ World Watch Monitor, 'Maldives activist investigated for 'blasphemy' over 'religion other than Islam' tweet', 8 January, 2018, Maldives activist investigated for 'blasphemy' over 'religion other than Islam' tweet'

²⁸⁴ Human Rights Without Frontiers International, 'Religious Freedom in the Maldives: present and future challenges', July 2017, <https://hrwf.eu/religious-freedom-in-the-maldives-present-and-future-challenges/> and Johansson, A., 'Maldives crDaesh: a bitter religious divide comes to the fore'. The Conversation, 9 February, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/maldives-crisis-a-bitter-religious-divide-comes-to-the-fore-91455>

²⁸⁵ Schultz, K., 'Maldives, tourist haven, casts wary eye on growing Islamic radicalism'. New York Times, 18 June, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/18/world/asia/maldives-islamic-radicalism.html> and see: The Soufan Group, 'Foreign Fighters: An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq', December 2015, p.9, https://wb-iisg.com/wp-content/uploads/bp-attachments/4826/TSG_ForeignFightersUpflow.pdf

²⁸⁶ Dutta, P., 'Maldives election: Who is Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and what does he mean to India', <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/maldives-election-2018-ibrahim-mohamed-solih-1347563-2018-09-24>

²⁸⁷ USCIRF, 'Annual Report 2018', 2018, <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

²⁸⁸ World Watch Report, Nigeria Dossier, January 2018, Pg.2

are constitutionally entitled. Violations include the denial of access to jobs to non-Muslims in security and other sectors, and difficulty in accessing education.²⁸⁹

In most sharia states, church construction is severely restricted and church buildings are demolished for real or fabricated infractions.²⁹⁰ Churches are also regularly destroyed during violence.²⁹¹ The CAN²⁹² Kwara State Chapter reported that on 1 January 2018 extremists attacked the Christ Apostolic Church Oke-Isegun in Taiwo Isale, looting and destroying buildings, and chanting “Allah is God,” and “Allah Akbar, this land belongs to the Muslims”.²⁹³

Worsening drought and desertification – a result of climate change - have forced large numbers of nomadic herders to migrate south in search of water and land for grazing. The migration of these predominantly Muslim herders into predominantly Christian areas has led to increasingly frequent and violent disputes over land.²⁹⁴

Despite a long history of disputes between nomadic herders and farming communities across the Sahel, some commentators argue that attacks by a militia consisting of members of the Fulani ethnic group are now occurring with such frequency, organisation and asymmetry that references to ‘farmer-herder clashes’ no longer suffice.²⁹⁵ It has been reported that 1,107 people have been killed in 111 documented attacks by militia in the first quarter of 2018. In the same time frame, 47 Fulani deaths were confirmed in 7 attacks on their communities.²⁹⁶ An increase in the use of heavy weapons and organisation has led local observers to describe the attacks as a campaign of ethno-religious cleansing.²⁹⁷ Supporters of this view also point to the fact that churches are regularly destroyed in attacks. Over 500 have been destroyed in Benue state alone.²⁹⁸

Other commentators maintain that the violence is predominantly driven by factors such as resource competition and the breakdown of traditional mediation mechanisms, and that there is no single-factor which can explain the violence.²⁹⁹ Whatever the drivers of the conflict are, both sides of the argument agree that the Governmental response has been inadequate and that failure to bring perpetrators to justice has encouraged the violence.^{300,301}

Boko Haram continues to practice kidnapping and forced conversions. On 19 February 2018, 110 girls were abducted from the Government Girls Science and Technical College, Dapchi. On 21 March 2018, 104 girls were returned, five had died. The sole Christian in the group, Leah Sharibu, remains in

²⁸⁹ CSW, ‘Nigeria: Freedom of religion or belief’, 9 July 2018, Pg. 1, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/09/report/4036/article.htm>

²⁹⁰ Ibid. Pg. 1.

²⁹¹ Ibid. Pg. 1.

²⁹² Christian Association of Nigeria

²⁹³ CSW, ‘Nigeria: Freedom of religion or belief’, 9 July 2018, Pg. 2, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/09/report/4036/article.htm>

²⁹⁴ International Crisis Group, ‘Stopping Nigeria’s Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence’, 26 July 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence>

²⁹⁵ Ibid. Pg. 3.

²⁹⁶ CSW, ‘Nigeria: Freedom of religion or belief’, 9 July 2018, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/09/report/4036/article.htm> and see Appendix for more extensive catalogue of death toll in attacks launched between 1 January 2018 and 29 April 2018.

²⁹⁷ Ibid. Pg. 3.

²⁹⁸ Vanguard Newspapers, ‘Herdsman destroyed 500 churches in Benue — CAN’, 14th March 2018.

<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/03/herdsman-destroyed-500-churches-benue-can/>

²⁹⁹ International Crisis Group. Stopping Nigeria’s Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence, 26 July 2018

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence>

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ CSW, ‘Nigerian priests killed during morning Mass’, CSW, 25 April 2018,

<https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/4/25/press/3935/article.htm> <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/25/press/3935/article.htm>

captivity, denied release due to her refusal to wear a hijab and convert to Islam.³⁰² Despite receiving several warnings, the military did nothing to stop the abduction.³⁰³

The leader of Nigeria's Shia community, Sheikh Zakzaky and his wife have been detained since December 2015 after an army assault on their home during which three of their sons died. Since then authorities have ignored court rulings ordering their release. In January 2018, Zakzaky was allowed to make his first heavily controlled public appearance in two years, following rumours of the Sheikh's declining health and imminent death. Around 50 Shia girls and women allegedly abducted by the army following the attack on Zakzaky's residence are also reportedly held incommunicado. Furthermore, a report released on 1 August 2016 by the Judicial Commission of Inquiry established by the Kaduna State government found the Nigerian Army responsible for the killing and mass burial of 347 unarmed Shia's.

Pakistan

Pakistan's population is predominantly Sunni (85-90 %) with 10-15 % of the population adhering to Shia Islam. Some 3.6 % of the population are Christian or Hindu.³⁰⁴

Pakistan's military establishment and authorities continue to support banned terrorist groups and religious extremists. Members of extremist parties and groups on the Government's terror watch list, such as Ahle-Sunnat-Wal-Jammat (ASWJ) and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), have been allowed to participate in elections.³⁰⁵ Another religious extremist party that has been tolerated, if not supported, by the Pakistani military state was Tahreek-e-labbaik Party (TLP). The TLP have publicly advocated for the death of anyone who challenges Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

Blasphemy is prohibited in Pakistan under sections 295 and 298 of the penal code. Since 2011, almost 100 blasphemy cases have been registered. Approximately 40 of those 100 accused are awaiting the death penalty or are serving life sentences.³⁰⁶ A simple accusation of blasphemy can amount to a death sentence in Pakistan, as vigilante mobs often take it upon themselves to punish those accused. For example, in April 2017, college student Mashal Khan was murdered in broad daylight by a mob of fellow students at Abdul Wali Khan University after he was accused of blasphemy.³⁰⁷

Prominent female activist and IHEU board member Gulalai Ismail was accused of blasphemy by a man, who she later managed to take to the court. In October 2018, following a speaking tour in the UK, she was arrested on her return to Pakistan, had her passport removed and was placed on the Exit Control List (ECL), preventing her from leaving the country.³⁰⁸

The most recent high-profile case of the misuse of the blasphemy laws has been that of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010. She was finally acquitted by the Supreme Court in October 2018. This decision was met with ferocious protests and calls for the death of the

³⁰² CSW, 'Call to Prayer for Leah Sharibu', 26 March 2018, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/03/26/press/3891/article.htm>

³⁰³ Amnesty International UK, 'Press release. Nigeria: Security forces failed to act on warnings about Boko Haram attack before abduction of schoolgirls', 19 March 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/nigeria-security-forces-failed-act-warnings-about-boko-haram-attack-abduction>

³⁰⁴ CIA World fact book, 'Pakistan', <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pk.html>

³⁰⁵ National Counter Terrorism Authority NACTA Pakistan, 'Proscribed Organizations', <https://nacta.gov.pk/proscribed-organizations/>

³⁰⁶ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2018 Annual Report, Pakistan Chapter, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_PAKISTAN.pdf Date accessed: 12/11/18

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ International Humanist and Ethical Union, 'Update: Gulalai Ismail released on bail', 12 October 2018, <https://iheu.org/urgent-call-action-gulalai-ismail-arrested-return-pakistan/>

judges involved by the TLP.³⁰⁹ In response to the protests, the Government has agreed to a review of the Court's decision and has refused to allow her to leave the country.³¹⁰

Pakistan's penal code also prohibits Ahmadis from calling themselves Muslims, distributing religious literature or even calling their place of worship a mosque. Ahmadis have been arrested on false charges of blasphemy – currently three Ahmadis are on death row following charges of blasphemy³¹¹ – and have been subjected to vicious attacks in public, including having acid thrown at them.³¹² Hundreds of Ahmadis have been murdered on grounds of their faith. Ahmadis are also technically prohibited from voting because to in order to vote, the state requires them to register as non-Muslim, which many refuse to do.³¹³ In 2018, their historic mosque in Punjab was destroyed by a mob attack.³¹⁴

Targeted killings and enforced disappearances of Shia Muslims continued in 2018. According to reports, at least 9 members of the Hazara Shia have been killed in targeted attacks. Hindus, Christians, Sikhs and other non-Muslim Pakistanis also face societal discrimination, harassment, and physical attacks. The targeted killing of [Charnjit Singh](#),³¹⁵ a prominent and highly respected Sikh religious leader, reveals the threat under which religious minorities live in Pakistan. Similarly, the alleged torture by FIA officials of [Sajid Masih](#),³¹⁶ a 24-year-old Christian man, during his custody, has exposed how minorities are vulnerable and unsafe even when in the hands of those who are meant to provide them protection. Local authorities, particularly in Punjab province, are often accused of failing to properly investigate cases of forced marriage and conversion of religious minorities. Pakistani NGOs such as the Movement for Solidarity and Peace have estimated that at least 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and forcibly married, or sold into prostitution, annually in Pakistan.³¹⁷ According to reports, the rate of forced conversions of Hindus is higher than any other minority in Pakistan.³¹⁸

³⁰⁹ Barker, M., 'Asia Bibi: Pakistan court overturns blasphemy death sentence', 32 October 2018, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/31/asia-bibi-verdict-pakistan-court-overturns-blasphemy-death-sentence>

³¹⁰ Sherwood, H., 'Pakistan blasphemy case: Asia Bibi freed from jail', 8 November 2018, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/07/pakistan-blasphemy-case-christian-farm-labourer-asia-bibi-still-in-jail>

³¹¹ Hashim, A., 'Three Ahmadis sentenced to death for blasphemy', 12 October 2018, Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/ahmadis-sentenced-death-blasphemy-171012081709423.html>

³¹² Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of the UK, International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day briefing for Marie Rimmer MP, see the speech made on 25 October 2018 here: <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/whall/?id=2018-10-25b.201.0>

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Sayeed, A., 'Pakistani mob destroys 100-year-old minority Ahmadi mosque', Reuters, 24 May 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-ahmadis/pakistani-mob-destroys-100-year-old-minority-ahmadi-mosque-idUSKCN1IP20H>

³¹⁵ The Tribune, 30 May 2018, 'Sikh leader shot dead in Pakistan', <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/sikh-leader-shot-dead-in-pakistan/596848.html>

³¹⁶ DW, 'Uproar in Pakistan over 'torture and sexual abuse' of Christian youth', <https://www.dw.com/en/uproar-in-pakistan-over-torture-and-sexual-abuse-of-christian-youths/a-42771495>

³¹⁷ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2018 Annual Report, Pakistan Chapter, https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_PAKISTAN.pdf Date accessed: 12/11/18

³¹⁸ Bhanbhro, S., 'Gorced conversion of Hindu girls in Pakistan make a mockery of its constitution' The Conversation, 14 August 2018, <http://theconversation.com/forced-conversions-of-hindu-girls-in-pakistan-make-a-mockery-of-its-constitution-80420>

Russia

Russia's³¹⁹ population is about 146 million.³²⁰ Many Russians describe themselves as Orthodox but the percentage attending services is at most about 3%.³²¹ There are also centuries-old communities of Buddhists, non-Orthodox Christians, Jews, indigenous pagans and Muslims, as well as atheists and followers of many other beliefs³²². Serious systemic violations of many human rights take place in the country³²³. Long-running "anti-extremism" campaigns against Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of works by theologian Said Nursi have led to among other things nationwide literature bans on no credible evidence, with the possessors of such texts being liable to criminal prosecution³²⁴.

The most high-profile escalation was the April 2017 total ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses, making any Jehovah's Witness who exercises freedom of religion and belief liable to criminal prosecution.³²⁵ Jehovah's Witnesses, are increasingly being detained for long periods of a year or more. As of 25 October, 79 Jehovah's Witnesses are under criminal investigation. Of these, 22 are in pre-trial detention, 17 under house arrest, and 30 under travel restrictions.³²⁶

Muslims who meet together to pray and read the works of theologian Said Nursi have long been targeted.³²⁷ Such Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief include: in June 2017 Yevgeny Kim jailed for 3 years and 9 months for meeting with other Muslims to study Nursi's writings;³²⁸ in November 2017 Ziyavdin Dapayev was jailed for 4 years and Sukhrab and Artur Kaltuyev were jailed for 3 years each for meeting other Muslims to study Nursi's works;³²⁹ in May 2018 Ilgar Aliyev was jailed for 8 years for meeting other Muslims to study Nursi's works;³³⁰ and in July 2018 Komil Odilov was jailed for 2 years for meeting other Muslims to study Nursi's works.³³¹ Other Muslims continue to face criminal charges for meeting together. Typically, such Muslims meet in private homes to study Islam, with one or more expounding Nursi's works. They also pray, eat, and drink tea together, and do not seek state permission to meet.³³²

Raids on people who exercise their freedom of religion and belief without state permission involve many officials. In a typical April 2018 late-night raid on the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses - who are pacifists – troops with machine guns, Russian Navy investigators, Investigative Committee officials, ordinary police, FSB secret police, public prosecutors, and a judge with court officials were all involved³³³.

³¹⁹ Forum 18's reports on particular freedom of religion and belief violations in Russia can be found here: <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=10> and Forum 18's January 2017 general Russia religious freedom survey can be found here: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246, and Forum 18's September 2016 "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey is at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215

³²⁰ US Commission on International Religious Freedom Russia chapter, 2017 Annual Report <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Russia.2017.pdf>

³²¹ Geraldine Fagan, *Believing in Russia*, Routledge, 2013, pp 24-25

³²² Forum 18, 'January 2017 general Russia religious freedom survey', January 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246

³²³ Human Rights Watch, 'Russia: Events of 2017', 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/russia>

³²⁴ Forum 18, "'extremism" Russia religious freedom survey', September 2016, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215

³²⁵ Forum 18, 'Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses banned, property confiscated', 20 April 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2274

³²⁶ Forum 18, 'Russia: Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses arrested, Muslims convicted', 25 October 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2426

³²⁷ Forum 18, "'extremism" Russia religious freedom survey, September 2016, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215

³²⁸ Forum 18, 'Russia: Prison, trials, investigations for religious meetings', 23 June 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2290

³²⁹ Forum 18, 'Russia: Three more Muslim prisoners of conscience', 8 December 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2339

³³⁰ Forum 18, 'Russia: Longest jail term yet for religious meeting', 8 June 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386

³³¹ Forum 18, 'Russia: Two years' jail to punish religious study meetings', 2 July 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2391

³³² Forum 18, 'Russia: Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses arrested, Muslims convicted', 25 October 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2426

³³³ Forum 18, 'Russia: Armed raids, criminal investigations, pre-trial detentions', 23 April 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372

Other people exercising freedom of religion and belief are also targeted, particularly after the July 2016 introduction of “anti-terrorism” restrictions on (among other things) sharing beliefs. Only people with permission from state-registered belief organisations can now share beliefs, and the restrictions also: restrict the beliefs that can be shared; restrict the places where beliefs may be shared; and ban any beliefs from being shared in residential buildings. Converting residential property to religious use – something which very many belief groups do across Russia – is also banned³³⁴. The first two targets were a Baptist pastor and a Hare Krishna devotee³³⁵, and in the following year 181 such cases were brought³³⁶.

Saudi Arabia

While Saudi Arabia is famous for its Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam, it is estimated that its adherents only make up approximately 20% of Saudi Arabia’s population. The majority of Saudi Arabia’s 85-90% Sunni population follow the Hanbali School of jurisprudence, with adherents of the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i and Sufi groups also present. While there have been some symbolic acts taken in 2018 under the new Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, that include increased contact with church officials and changing the laws around women wearing the abaya (a usually black robe),³³⁷ the reality for the majority of Saudi’s population has not changed. Members of non-Hanbali Sunni groups are known to have faced discrimination, and this has been particularly evident in the western region of Hejaz where Maliki and Shafi’i worshipers are based.³³⁸

Between 10-15 per cent of the population adhere to Shia Islam, mainly of the Twelver or Ithna’ashari grouping, with some Isma’ilis (approximately 700,000) and Zaydis also present in the country. Shia Muslims have experienced intense discrimination in Saudi Arabia for many years. The government’s crackdown on adherents of Shia Islam has, however, intensified since the outbreak of protests in the country’s Eastern Province in 2011. Under the auspices of security, the government has systematically arrested Shia citizens in connection with these protests, with key activists handed extreme sentences.³³⁹ For instance, the Saudi Arabian state executed 47 people in a single day in January 2016, including the Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. The Sheikh’s nephew, Ali al-Nimr, remains on death row (sentenced to death by beheading and crucifixion) for his participation in the protests when a teenager,³⁴⁰ as do Abdullah al-Zaher, Dawood al-Marhoon and Ali al-Ribh.³⁴¹ Dawood al-Marhoon’s confession, which led to a death sentence was extracted under the auspices of torture.³⁴² Shia Muslims also experience discrimination on a daily basis, with access to public education, public sector jobs and

³³⁴ Forum 18, ‘General Russia religious freedom survey’ January 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246

³³⁵ Forum 18, ‘Russia: Punishments under anti-sharing beliefs changes begin’, 26 August 2016,

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2211

³³⁶ Forum 18, ‘Russia: One year of “anti-missionary” punishments’, 8 August 2017,

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2305

³³⁷ Aid to the Church in Need, ‘Religious Freedom in the World Report 2018: Saudi Arabia’, <http://religious-freedom-report.org/report/?report=814>

³³⁸ CIA World Factbook, ‘Saudi Arabia’, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html> and Minority Rights Group, ‘Saudi Arabia’, March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/saudi-arabia/>

³³⁹ Minority Rights Group, ‘Saudi Arabia’, March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/saudi-arabia/>

³⁴⁰ Amnesty International, ‘Three ways Saudi Arabia is abusing rights and getting away with it’. 12 January, 2018,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/06/3-ways-saudi-arabia-is-abusing-human-rights/> And Reprieve, ‘What happens to protestors arrested in Saudi Arabia’, undated, <https://reprieve.org.uk/vision-2030/the-facts/protesters-in-saudi-arabia/>

³⁴¹ Reprieve, ‘What happens to protestors arrested in Saudi Arabia’, undated, <https://reprieve.org.uk/vision-2030/the-facts/protesters-in-saudi-arabia/>

³⁴² Ibid

military, political and judicial positions restricted.³⁴³ School textbooks also criticise Shia and Sufi practices such as visiting religious shrines.³⁴⁴

Non-Muslim religious minorities and atheists are forbidden from expressing their religion or belief publicly in Saudi Arabia.³⁴⁵ The language the Saudi Arabian state uses to refer to these minority communities gives an indication of how it views them. For instance, government-appointed religious scholars refer to religious minorities in derogatory terms in official documents and religious rulings which have an influence on government decisions.³⁴⁶ The cleric Saad bin Ateeq al-Ateeq, notorious for sectarian hate speech against Shias, Alawites, Christians and Jews, serves as a supervisor for Islamic awareness at the Ministry of Education.³⁴⁷ Furthermore, Jews, Christians and other minority religious communities are referred to as 'kuffar' or 'unbelievers' in the Education Ministry's school textbook. It is in this area that, despite Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's reformist agenda, there has been little to no progress.³⁴⁸ The lack of progress was highlighted in a March 2018 report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom which noted that a number of inflammatory passages against minority religious communities, believed to have been removed, were in fact still present in the textbooks and had the potential to incite violence and intolerance against Saudi Arabia's minority religious communities.³⁴⁹

Anyone found to have insulted Islam is severely punished in Saudi Arabia, as seen in the case of blogger Raif Badawi, who remains in prison after being arrested in 2012.³⁵⁰ Recent anti-terrorism legislation states that one form of terrorism is "Calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based." Since the government system is grounded in Wahhabi interpretations of Islam, non-believers are assumed to be enemies of the Saudi state. This legislation not only frames non-believers as terrorists but, along with related royal decrees, creates a legal framework that outlaws as terrorism nearly all thought or expression critical of the government and its understanding of Islam.

'Blasphemy' is conceived as a deviation from Sunni Islam and thus may also be treated as 'apostasy'. Apostasy is criminalised and mandates a death penalty. The criminal accusation of apostasy is sometimes deployed against people (including writers, activists, artists, or lawyers) who show any serious sign of pushing at the outer boundaries of freedom of expression, or who are critical of the religious authorities, and whose views (rightly or wrongly) are termed 'atheist' or as 'insulting to religion'.

Non-Muslim migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, many of whom are from India, the Philippines and the African continent, and hence are Christian, Buddhist, Hindu or Sikh. They also experience persecution on the basis of ethnicity, class and religion and often experience pressure to convert to Islam. Christian

³⁴³ Whitson, S., 'Briefing on religious freedom and human rights for Shia communities in Sunni countries'. Human Rights Watch, 26 June 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/26/briefing-religious-freedom-and-human-rights-shia-communities-sunni-countries>

³⁴⁴ Coogle, A., 'Shining a spotlight on hate speech in Saudi textbooks'. Human Rights Watch, 23 January 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/23/shining-spotlight-hate-speech-saudi-textbooks>

³⁴⁵ Minority Rights Group, 'Saudi Arabia', March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/saudi-arabia/> and 'Saudi Arabia told: 'Christians are not second-class citizens''. World Watch monitor, 27 April, 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/saudi-arabia-told-christians-are-not-second-class-citizens/>

³⁴⁶ Whitson, S., 'Briefing on religious freedom and human rights for Shia communities in Sunni countries'. Human Rights Watch, 26 June 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/26/briefing-religious-freedom-and-human-rights-shia-communities-sunni-countries>

³⁴⁷ Minority Rights Group, 'Saudi Arabia', March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/saudi-arabia/>

³⁴⁸ Coogle, A., 'Shining a spotlight on hate speech in Saudi textbooks'. Human Rights Watch, 23 January 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/23/shining-spotlight-hate-speech-saudi-textbooks>

³⁴⁹ USCIRF, 'USCIRF study reveals numerous passages in Saudi textbooks inciting violence and intolerance'. 24 March 2018, <https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/press-releases-statements/uscifr-study-reveals-numerous-passages-in-saudi-textbooks>

³⁵⁰ USCIRF, 'Annual report of the U.S. commission on international religious freedom' April 2018, p.82, <https://www.uscifr.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

maids living in Saudi Arabian households have been reported to experience high levels of physical and sexual abuse.³⁵¹ Likewise, the case of Gurwinder Singh highlights that Sikh migrants are being forced to cut their hair and eat halal meat when in Saudi Arabian prisons.³⁵²

Somalia

As a result of years of war in Somalia, there are currently no reliable figures for the country's population or minority groups.³⁵³ Even so, while the vast majority of the population are Sunni Muslims, those of local religious beliefs and traditions, Christians and Islamic groups such as Sufis³⁵⁴ and the Ashraf and Shekhal groups are known to reside in the country.³⁵⁵

The country's provisional constitution undermines the international right to freedom of religion or belief in a number of ways. Firstly, the constitution prohibits apostasy and considers the Koran and Sunna as the main sources of law within the country. The judicial system also relies on Islamic, traditional and customary law.³⁵⁶ Non-Muslims are therefore at risk of being criminalised for failing to adhere to Islamic law and tradition.

Beyond the state, both society at large and terrorist organisations are the biggest threat to religious minority communities. The Sufi community, once relatively large, has dwindled since the civil war in 1990s. While there is evidence that the community has increased somewhat in recent years, Al Shabaab continues to identify Sufis as non-believers and hence legitimate targets.³⁵⁷ Likewise, the Ashraf community and Shekhal community often experience discrimination on the basis of their differing religious practices.³⁵⁸

The Christian community in Somalia experiences persecution from families, wider society and terrorist organisations. While reporting is rare, Fr. Steffano Tollu, Military Chaplain of the Italian contingent of the European Union training mission in Somalia³⁵⁹ gave evidence of the dangers for Christians in February 2018. His contact in Mogadishu noted that elderly Somali Christians have experienced hostility from their own grandchildren, with some even being murdered. This generation, born in the 1990s, has been influenced by Somalia's move towards more radical Islam. It is on this basis that Fr. Steffano's contact argues that Mogadishu's Christian community should be defined as 'endangered'.³⁶⁰ This position was further illuminated when the Church of St. Anthony of Padua in Mogadishu re-opened in July 2017 after being closed for 30 years because of the danger facing attendees. The government closed the church a week later so as to 'respect the wishes of the people [i.e. wider Somali society] and their religious leaders'.³⁶¹

³⁵¹ World Watch Research, 'Saudi Arabia: country dossier', April 2018 p.16.

³⁵² Jas Uppal, 'Modern Slavery – Persecution of migrant workers under 'Kafala'. Justice Upheld, 8 April 2018, <http://justiceupheld.org.uk/modern-slavery-persecution-migrant-workers-kafala/>

³⁵³ Minority Rights Group, 'Somalia', May 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/somalia/>

³⁵⁴ Mohamed, H., 'Somalia's sufi revival'. Al Jazeera, 29 March 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/03/somalia-sufi-revival-160329085331665.html>

³⁵⁵ Minority Rights Group, 'Somalia', May 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/somalia/>

³⁵⁶ USCIRF, 'Annual report of the U.S. commission on international religious freedom' April 2017, <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

³⁵⁷ Mohamed, H., 'Somalia's sufi revival'. Al Jazeera, 29 March 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/03/somalia-sufi-revival-160329085331665.html>

³⁵⁸ Minority Rights Group, 'Somalia', May 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/somalia/>

³⁵⁹ The formation and training mission financed by the European Union.

³⁶⁰ Agenzia Fides, 'Africa/Somalia – A small community of Somali Christians live their faith by hiding'. 28 February 2018, http://www.fides.org/en/news/63823-AFRICA_SOMALIA_A_small_community_of_Somali_Christians_lives_their_faith_in_hiding

³⁶¹ World Watch Monitor, 'Somaliland closes only Catholic Church due to public pressure – I re-opened a week ago after 30 years', 4 August 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/somaliland-closes-catholic-church-due-public-pressure-re-opened-week-ago-30-years/>

This small Christian community is also at risk from the terrorist organisation Al-Shabaab,³⁶² which has played a key role in radicalising Somali society by consistently drawing parallels between Christians and foreign forces based in Somalia – which it refers to as “Christian forces that have come to Somalia to spoil Islam”.³⁶³ The organisation is also active along the Somali-Kenyan border where a more visible Christian community resides. For instance, police in the coastal region of Kwale found a haul of weapons in December 2017 which coincided with government warnings of the possibility that Al-Shabaab militants were planning attacks in the area. Three Christian teachers were murdered by suspected Al-Shabaab gunmen in February 2018 and four ‘non-Muslim’ quarrymen were murdered near the Somali border by Al-Shabaab in May 2018.³⁶⁴ While it is not possible to identify the exact religion of these men, it is likely that they were ‘non-locals’ and hence assumed to be Christian.³⁶⁵ On 10 October 2018, two Christian teachers were killed by suspected al-Shabaab militants in Mandera County, north-eastern Kenya. According to a report by the Kenyan Standard, the attackers first threw explosives into the teachers’ house at Arabia Boys Secondary School at night and then opened fire.³⁶⁶

More recently, reporting has also highlighted how Daesh has found a foothold in Puntland State in northeast Somalia where it is recruiting foreign fighters fleeing Iraq and Syria as well as former al-Shabaab fighters.³⁶⁷

Sudan

Sudan has a poor human rights record, with freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as well as freedom of expression and association severely limited. The vast majority of Sudan’s 97% Muslim population are Sunni, but Sufi orders are strong, and some Muslims of the Salafi movement also reside in the country.³⁶⁸ Sudan’s largest minority religious community are Christian, but only account for 3% of its population. 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.³⁶⁹

The Christian community has experienced systematic persecution from the Sudanese government as well as Islamic clerics and wider Sudanese society for many years.³⁷⁰ This has historically manifested itself in a number of ways from the imprisonment and fining of Christian leaders, to claims of apostasy against Christian individuals to churches being closed, demolished or ceased, to the state’s attempt at the forced Islamisation of the Christian community living in the Nuba mountain region.³⁷¹ The government has also been accused of supporting radical Islamic militants for the past three decades.³⁷²

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has reported the government’s rejection of church permits, as well as church closures, seizures and even demolition

³⁶² Minority Rights Group, ‘Somalia’, May 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/somalia/>

³⁶³ World Watch Research, ‘Somalia: country dossier’ April 2018, p.4.

³⁶⁴ BBC News, ‘Africa Live this week: court halts Tanzania’s ‘blogging fees’, April 30, 2018.

³⁶⁵ World Watch Monitor, ‘Kenya: four ‘non-Muslims’ killed on Somalia border’, 11 May 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/kenya-four-non-muslims-killed-on-somalia-border/>

³⁶⁶ Ombati, C., ‘Suspected Al-Shabaab attackers kjiil two teachers in Mandera’, 10 October 2018, Standard Digital <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001298512/suspected-al-shabaab-attackers-kill-two-teachers-in-mandera>

³⁶⁷ Canadian Catholic News, ‘Islamic State has landed in lawless Somalia, bishop says’ in The Catholic Register, 15 February 2018, <https://www.catholicregister.org/home/international/item/26827-islamic-state-has-landed-in-lawless-somalia-bishop-says>

³⁶⁸ USCIRF, ‘Annual report of the U.S. commission on international religious freedom’ April 2017, p.84, <https://www.uscifr.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2017-annual-report>

³⁶⁹ IBID, p.85

³⁷⁰ World Watch Research, ‘Sudan: country dossier’ April 2018, p.11

³⁷¹ For Nuba Christians see Minority Rights Group, ‘Sudan’, June 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/sudan/>

³⁷² World Watch Research, ‘Sudan: country dossier’ April 2018, p.9

for over a decade.³⁷³ In 2016, the government created a list of 27 churches it intended to demolish.³⁷⁴ The government's practice has been widely condemned within the international community, with European Union (EU) Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief³⁷⁵ Jan Figel raising the issue with the Sudanese authorities in March 2017. He was told demolitions would stop, but they continued from August 2017.³⁷⁶

This document's reporting period has seen a continuation of the state interfering with church buildings and congregations. With regard to the 27 churches, the government was forced to hand back ownership of 19 properties in September 2018³⁷⁷ and to drop charges against 5 pastors of the Sudan Church of Christ. Harassment however continued – from a church demolition in February 2018,³⁷⁸ to the government interfering with denominational committees (committees elected by those attending the church/churches) and detaining and fining church leaders objecting to this interference in November 2017,³⁷⁹ April 2018³⁸⁰ and October 2018.³⁸¹ Sudanese security officials arrested 13 Christians in the western region of Darfur on 13 October 2018.³⁸²

While a small Shia community and those of local religious beliefs and traditions also exist in Sudan³⁸³, reports of persecution are rarely forthcoming.³⁸⁴ The strict criminal code which imposes the National Congress Party government's interpretation of Sharia on Muslims and non-Muslims alike, however, enforces a range of extreme punishments from fines and imprisonment to lashings and execution for 'crimes' such as adultery, blasphemy and offences against public morality.³⁸⁵ These communities are therefore, at least in theory, in danger of experiencing persecution, as would any individual of any other non-Muslim faith or adherent of non-belief³⁸⁶ residing in Sudan.

³⁷³ See USCIRF Sudan home page for reports on Sudan from 2006 to the present

³⁷⁴ World Watch Monitor, 'Second church in ten days torn down in Sudan'. 23 May, 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/second-church-10-days-torn-sudan/>

³⁷⁵ With responsibility for countries outside of the EU

³⁷⁶ Rees, M., 'World Watch List report 2018: death by a thousand cuts the rise of non-violent persecution as a tool of suppression'. January 2018, p.10, https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/resources/world_watch_list_report_2018_final.pdf

³⁷⁷ World Watch Monitor, 'Sudanese government gives back 19 properties to church body', 26 September 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/09/sudanese-government-gives-back-19-properties-to-church-body/>

³⁷⁸ World Watch Monitor, 'Sudanese church leaders back in court', 7 February 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/sudanese-church-leader-charged-with-apostasy/>

³⁷⁹ CSW, 'Sudanese religious leaders unjustly convicted', 6 November 2017, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2017/11/06/news/3773/article.htm>

³⁸⁰ World Watch Monitor, 'Sudan: four Christians charged, 36 others to stand trial', 19 April 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/04/sudan-four-christians-charged-36-others-to-stand-trial/>

³⁸¹ World Watch Monitor, 'Sudan: 13 Christians arrested in Darfur, another church told to hand over property', 17 October 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/10/sudan-13-christians-arrested-in-darfur-another-church-told-to-hand-over-property/>

³⁸² Ibid

³⁸³ USCIRF, 'Annual report of the U.S. commission on international religious freedom' April 2017, <https://www.uscirt.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

³⁸⁴ However, according to Open Doors' World Watch Research, radical Islamic groups are suspected of attacking a Sufi shrine in Khartoum on 2 December 2011 and Shia religious celebrations in Omdurman on 31 January 2012 (see. World Watch Research, 'Sudan: country dossier' April 2018, p.3)

³⁸⁵ USCIRF, 'Annual report of the U.S. commission on international religious freedom' April 2017, p.85, <https://www.uscirt.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report>

³⁸⁶ See 'The seven countries where the state can execute you for being atheist' The Washington Post, 10 December 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2fnews%2fworldviews%2fwp%2f2012%2f12%2f10%2fthe-seven-countries-where-the-state-can-execute-you-for-being-atheist%2f%3f&utm_term=.712621c185ed

Syria

Sunni Muslims are the majority faith community in Syria. There are significant Alawite, Christian and Druze communities,³⁸⁷ as well as Yazidis³⁸⁸ and adherents of other diverse religious communities. Prior to the civil war, Syria was renowned for its religious diversity and tolerance. However, both sides of the war have used tactics that have significantly increased sectarian tensions in the country.

The Syrian Constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and Islamic Jurisprudence to be a main source of legislation.³⁸⁹ The Constitution 'respects all religions' and guarantees the manifestation of religion that does 'not prejudice public order'. The Constitution further permits different religious communities to legislate their own personal and family matters.³⁹⁰ Separate religious education is provided for different faith groups and both Muslim and Christian holidays are recognised.³⁹¹ Conversions from one faith community to another³⁹² and interreligious marriage³⁹³ are rare and discouraged by the state to prevent social disorder.³⁹⁴ Converts from Islam can face pressure from family members.³⁹⁵

President Assad is from the Alawite community, a historically persecuted sect with links to Shia Islam that has faced targeting by Daesh and others.³⁹⁶ The regime has long promoted itself as a protector of religious minorities against Islamist extremists and this narrative has strengthened during the war.

Although no longer in control of territory, Daesh is still active in Syria. Daesh continues to commit atrocities against non-Muslims and those Muslims who do not adhere to their version of Islam. In July 2018 Daesh killed 300 Druze in a series of suicide bombings and door-to-door killings. They also captured 37 hostages, which they subsequently killed.³⁹⁷ Daesh committed mass executions and targeted arrests of Christians, and also attacked Shias and Yazidis.³⁹⁸

Pro-Turkish militias and the Turkish army have allowed Islamist militants free reign in Afrin, installing Sharia and targeting Christians, Yazidis and other non-Muslims for forced eviction, displacement, and conversion.³⁹⁹ There are reports of militia glorifying the killing of Christians,⁴⁰⁰ and using anti-minority language and slogans associated with al-Qaeda.⁴⁰¹ Yazidi places of worship in the area have been

³⁸⁷ CIA, 'World Factbook: Religions', <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html>

³⁸⁸ SBS, 22 Aug. 2017, 'The Yazidi people: who are they and why are they on the run?' <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/explainer/yazidi-people-who-are-they-and-why-are-they-run>

³⁸⁹ Constitution of Syria, Article 3, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/constitution-of-syria-article-3-islam>

³⁹⁰ The Law Library of Congress, 'Syria: Treatment of Religious Minorities', Aug. 2016, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/file/882901/download>

³⁹¹ Cultural Atlas, 'Syrian Culture', <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/syrian-culture/syrian-culture-religion>

³⁹² *ibid*

³⁹³ IHEU, 'Freedom of Through Report: Syria', 4 July 2016, <https://freethoughtreport.com/countries/asia-western-asia/syria/>

³⁹⁴ World Watch Research, May 2018, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/SYRIA-WWR-COUNTRY-DOSSIER-May-2018.pdf>

³⁹⁵ *ibid*

³⁹⁶ Minority Rights Group, 'Syria: Alawis', <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/alawis/>

³⁹⁷ CSW, 6 Aug. 2018, 'Syrian Druze hostage killed', <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/08/06/press/4055/article.htm>

³⁹⁸ USCIRF, '2018 Annual Report', April 2018, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF2018AnnualReport_abb_wlinks.pdf

³⁹⁹ World Watch Monitor, 'Syria: Christians and Yazidis among 250,000 displaced in Afrin', 19 June 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/syria-christians-and-yazidis-among-250000-displaced-in-afrin/>

⁴⁰⁰ Gavlak, D., 'Christian activists say militias target religious minorities in Syria', *Crux*, 16 March 2018, <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2018/03/16/christian-activists-say-militias-target-religious-minorities-in-syria/>

⁴⁰¹ Cockburn, P., 'Yazidis who suffered under Isis face forced conversion to Islam amid fresh persecution in Afrin', *The Independent*, 18 April 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-yazidis-Daesh-islam-conversion-afrin-persecution-kurdish-a8310696.html>

destroyed, their towns re-named and homes given to Islamist fighters. One militia member was quoted as saying to a Yazidi man “We came here to regain our lands and behead you.”⁴⁰²

Minority religious communities in Syria are also caught in the fault lines of the Arab-Kurdish conflict. Yazidis and other non-Muslims are seen by the Turkish military and their allies as both infidels and Kurds, making them doubly vulnerable in the current conflict.⁴⁰³ On the other hand, Christian schools under Kurdish authority which resist promoting Kurdish values report raids, interference and confiscation of property.⁴⁰⁴

Turkey

Turkey’s population is predominantly Sunni Muslim, with only 0.2% of the country professing a non-Islamic religion – mainly Christian and Jewish.⁴⁰⁵ Turkey has long-standing freedom of religion or belief problems impacting groups and individuals from diverse religious or belief backgrounds as well as atheists and agnostics.⁴⁰⁶ These require fundamental changes. However, the deterioration of human rights protection in the recent years, “as restrictive government and judicial actions have progressively affected large strata of society”,⁴⁰⁷ has not only resulted in no steps being taken to rectify the situation but also an increased vulnerability of religious or belief groups.

In Turkey no religious or belief community has legal personality, *per se*.⁴⁰⁸ This remains a vital issue affecting all religious or belief communities in the exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief in its collective dimension.⁴⁰⁹

Turkey's Armenian Apostolic community, the nation’s largest Christian community (about 40,000 people) has not been able to elect a new Patriarch for the last ten years and in 2018 the state again blocked the process for the election.⁴¹⁰

Turkey is yet to enforce numerous European Court of Human Rights judgements and ensure general measures are taken to prevent similar violations from occurring. The education system needs to respect the right of parents to raise their children in line with their religious or philosophical views (this problem impacts – among others – Alevis, atheists and agnostics, and Sunni Muslims critical of school teaching of religion). The right to conscientious objection to military service has to be recognised, places of worship must be able to acquire legal status without discrimination, the religion section in national identity cards must be removed and discrimination against the Alevi community in the provision of religious services needs to be corrected.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰² Ibid

⁴⁰³ Ibid

⁴⁰⁴ USCIRF, 2018 Annual Report, 2018, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF2018AnnualReport_abb_wlinks.pdf

⁴⁰⁵ CIA fact book, ‘Turkey’, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>

⁴⁰⁶ For a detailed report see Norwegian Helsinki Committee Freedom of Belief Initiative Report - “Monitoring Report on the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey, July 2014 – June 2015”, <http://inancozgurlugugirisimi.org/en/monitoring-report-on-the-right-to-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-in-turkey-2015-is-published/>.

⁴⁰⁷ Statement by Human Right Commissioner of the Council of Europe, Human rights in Turkey – the urgent need for a new beginning, 10 March 2017, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/human-rights-in-turkey-the-urgent-need-for-a-new-beginning>

⁴⁰⁸ 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

⁴⁰⁹ Mine Yıldırım, *The Collective Dimension of Freedom of Religion – the Case of Turkey*, Routledge, 2017.

⁴¹⁰ World Watch Monitor, ‘Turkish state blocks election of a new Armenian Patriarch’, 22 February 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/02/turkish-state-blocks-election-of-a-new-armenian-patriarch/>

⁴¹¹ 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.

Religious and ethnic groups continue to be targeted with hate speech in the media; in the first four months of 2018, Armenians, Jews, Greeks and Christians have experienced the largest number of occurrences of hate speech.⁴¹²

Protection of property belonging to religious or belief groups remains problematic. The expropriation of 82% of the parcels of land in the Suriçi district of the city of Diyarbakir in the aftermath of the 2015-2016 armed conflict impacted numerous places of worship, including the Armenian Surp Giragos Church and the Turkish Protestant Church.⁴¹³ Consequently, communities have to undertake burdensome legal processes for the reinstatement of their property rights. In March 2018, however, a bill passed in the Turkish Parliament authorised the return of 55 historic Syriac properties in South-east Turkey, many predating Ottoman times, to their original owners. But the recovery of various Syriac monasteries, village churches, and cemeteries, along with some 70 vineyards, gardens and lands attached to them, is still pending in the local courts.⁴¹⁴

Andrew Brunson, who had lived in Turkey for 23 years and worked as a Protestant pastor at the Izmir Resurrection Church, was arrested in October 2016 for aiding a terrorist organisation. He was held in prison until July 2018, then under house arrest⁴¹⁵ and was finally released in October 2018.⁴¹⁶ David Byle, a Christian evangelist who is a joint US and Canadian citizen, was arrested and ordered to leave Turkey just days after Andrew Brunson was released. He had been in Turkey for 18 years and been threatened with deportation on a number of occasions due to his missionary work.⁴¹⁷

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has a population of over 5 million people, around 85% being ethnic Turkmens (regarded as being of Muslim background), with the rest being made up of around 5% ethnic Uzbeks (likewise regarded as being of Muslim background), and smaller percentages of Slavs (mainly Russians and Ukrainians, many of Russian Orthodox or other Christian background), Kazakhs, Tatars, Armenians, Azeris and others.⁴¹⁸ Serious systemic violations of many human rights take place in the country.⁴¹⁹ All exercise of freedom of religion or belief with others without state permission is illegal, with compulsory registration of all religious or belief groups and severe restrictions on their activity. For example, all religious literature and any new places of worship must have state permission.⁴²⁰

The regime has repeatedly jailed Muslims who meet together to study their faith. For example, 5 Muslims met with others to pray and study their faith, using the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The authorities arrested the five men in May and June 2017. On 15 August 2017,

⁴¹² Hrant Dink Foundation, Hate Speech in the Media Report January-April 2018, <https://hrantdink.org/en/asulis-en/publications/75-media-watch-on-hate-speech-reports/1429-media-watch-on-hate-speech-january-april-2018><https://hrantdink.org/tr/asulis/faaliyetler/projeler/medyada-nefret-soylemi/1355-medyada-nefret-soylemi-ocak-nisan-2018-raporu-yayimlandi>.

⁴¹³ Expropriation Law no. 2942 on 21st of March, 2016 (App. 3).

⁴¹⁴ World Watch Monitor, 'Turkey returns confiscated Syriac church property deeds' 1 June 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/turkey-returns-confiscated-syriac-church-property-deeds/>

⁴¹⁵ BBC News, US pastor Andrew Brunson leaves prison in Turkey, 25 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44955224>

⁴¹⁶ BBC News, US pastor Andrew Brunson leaves prison in Turkey, 25 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44955224>

⁴¹⁷ Jones, M., 'Evangelist arrested in Turkey just days after Andrew Brunson release' Premier, 21 October 2018, <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/Evangelist-arrested-in-Turkey-just-days-after-Andrew-Brunson-release>

⁴¹⁸ Forum 18's reports on particular freedom of religion and belief violations in Turkmenistan can be found here: <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=32> and Forum 18's January 2017 Turkmenistan religious freedom survey can be found here: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244

⁴¹⁹ Human Right's Watch, 'Turkmenistan: Events of 2017, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/turkmenistan>

⁴²⁰ Forum 18, 'Turkmenistan religious freedom survey', January 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244

a panel of three judges at Balkan Regional Court in the regional capital Balkanabad sentenced the five men to 12-year jail terms in strict regime labour camps. The court ordered that religious literature, mobile phones and cash be confiscated from them. Four of the 5 are in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death.⁴²¹ Among other prisoners of conscience are Muslim prisoner Annamurad Atdaev, given a 15-year strict regime prison term in 2016 apparently for refusing to become an informer for the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police;⁴²² and Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov given a 4 year jail term in 2015 for hosting a meeting for worship.⁴²³

As of November 2018, 10 Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors to compulsory military service are known to be serving labour camp terms of 1 to 2 years. Nine are serving 1-year jail terms and the 10th a 2-year sentence.⁴²⁴ From 2014, courts punished conscientious objectors with corrective labour or suspended prison terms, rather than imprisonment. However, imprisonments re-started in January 2018.⁴²⁵

The regime continued to torture people imprisoned for exercising freedom of religion and belief, one member of an Islamic discussion group in June 2017 dying in jail. When Aziz Gafurov's body was returned to relatives, they were forced to promise not to reveal the body's condition. Other prisoners continue to be disappeared, with no-one knowing if they are alive or dead.⁴²⁶ Former prisoners state that torture is frequently used against prisoners, including against Muslims wishing to attend a prison mosque.⁴²⁷

Other freedom of religion and belief violations include a ban on exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission; MSS secret police informer recruitment inside belief communities; officials attempting to coerce non-Muslims into converting to Islam; severe obstacles to having a place of worship, including the arbitrary demolition of many mosques and other places of worship; severe restrictions on haj pilgrimage numbers; and harsh state censorship of religious literature.⁴²⁸

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan⁴²⁹ has over 32 million people, with over 80% being ethnic Uzbeks (regarded as being of mostly Sunni Muslim background), 5% Tajiks, about 2% Kazakhs, and about 2% Karakalpaks (regarded

⁴²¹ Forum 18, 'Turkmenistan: Appeals against 12-year jail terms fail', 27 July 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2399

⁴²² Forum 18, 'Turkmenistan: Another disappeared prisoner dies of torture', 27 September 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318

⁴²³ Forum 18, 'Turkmenistan: Torture and jail for one 4 year and 14 short-term prisoners of conscience', 21 May 2015, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2063

⁴²⁴ Forum 18, 'Turkmenistan: Tenth jailed conscientious objector in 2018', 21 September 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2417

⁴²⁵ Forum 18, 'Turkmenistan: Jailings of conscientious objectors resume', 23 March 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2363

⁴²⁶ Forum 18, 'Turkmenistan: Another disappeared prisoner dies of torture', 27 September 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318

⁴²⁷ Forum 18, 'Turkmenistan religious freedom survey', January 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244

⁴²⁸ Forum 18, 'Turkmenistan religious freedom survey', January 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244

⁴²⁹ Forum 18's reports on particular freedom of religion and belief violations in Uzbekistan can be found here: <http://forum18.org/archive.php?country=33> and Forum 18's September 2017 religious freedom survey can be found here: http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314

as being of mostly Sunni Muslim background) and others.⁴³⁰ Serious systemic violations of many human rights take place in the country.⁴³¹

Despite recent regime promises, there has not been systemic implementation of freedom of religion and belief and wider human rights obligations.⁴³² Some improvements include freeing some but not all Muslims jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief,⁴³³ and not imposing long jail terms on three Muslims found with Islamic texts on mobile phones⁴³⁴. All exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission is illegal, and all sharing of any beliefs is banned.⁴³⁵ In an attempt to stop public discussion of freedom of religion or belief issues, police and State Security Service (SSS) between late August and early September 2018 raided the homes of bloggers. Many were fined and given jail terms of up to two weeks. The authorities wanted “to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedoms”, a relative told Forum 18.⁴³⁶

Other continuing violations of freedom of religion and belief include police trying to stop men under 18 attending mosques. On 30 September after 40 Protestants were raided and arrested they faced “psychological pressure” resulting in two being hospitalised. Police also did nothing to stop four unknown women who accompanied them on the raid stealing property from female Protestants. Elsewhere, legally-bought books including Bibles and New Testaments were confiscated.⁴³⁷

In May 2018 the regime added new restrictive requirements for seeking state permission to exist and refused to explain why the regime instead of abolishing restrictions has increased them.⁴³⁸ Punishments for exercising freedom of religion and belief continue, including for seeking state registration. These include continued total control of the Muslim community, with officials unwilling to explain why the state and not mosque worshippers choose imams; Jehovah's Witnesses being fined for applying for registration in Samarkand; a Jehovah's Witness in Urgench being tortured after his community tried to get state registration; and Jehovah's Witnesses in Bukhara being fined for providing documents for registration.⁴³⁹

Meeting without state permission in private homes for worship or the study of sacred text is illegal.⁴⁴⁰ For example, in April 2018 police raided and threatened Baptists in Urgench with criminal prosecution for meeting to worship at Easter. In another raid, SSS secret police and ordinary police raided Baptists in Mubarek meeting for worship and fined two.⁴⁴¹ The regime often searches private homes for religious texts, including those which have passed the strict state censorship.⁴⁴² Women are often particularly targeted, and during one typical raid and the arrests, interrogations, and literature

⁴³⁰ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan religious freedom survey’, September 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314

⁴³¹ Human Rights Watch, ‘Uzbekistan: Events of 2017’, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/uzbekistan>

⁴³² Forum 18, ‘Forum 18 News Service’, <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33&results=200>

⁴³³ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan: Prisoners of conscience freed, others not’, 13 April 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2369

⁴³⁴ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan: Freed from punishment, but property ordered destroyed’, 26 June 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2390

⁴³⁵ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan religious freedom survey’ September 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314

⁴³⁶ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan: Jailings “to intimidate all who speak about freedoms”’, 20 September 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2416

⁴³⁷ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan: Under-18s pressured, illegal raids, legal books confiscated’, 19 October 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2424

⁴³⁸ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan: More legal personality restrictions imposed’, 18 July 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2396

⁴³⁹ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan: More legal personality restrictions imposed’, 18 July 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2396

⁴⁴⁰ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan religious freedom survey’, September 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314

⁴⁴¹ Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan: Criminal prosecution follows Easter worship meeting?’, 24 May 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2380

⁴⁴² Forum 18, ‘Uzbekistan religious freedom survey’, September 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314

confiscations which followed, only the women were forcibly undressed down to their underwear.⁴⁴³ This kind of violence and rape threats by officials is often also faced by Muslim and Jehovah's Witness women.⁴⁴⁴ Torture continues to be routine, with impunity for the torturers.⁴⁴⁵

Vietnam

Over 50% of the population of Vietnam is Buddhist. Approximately 6.6% are Catholic, and between 1 and 2% are Protestant. Hoa Hao Buddhists are estimated to make up 1.5-3% of the population, and Cao Daists are estimated to account for a further 1-4%. There is also a very small Muslim minority in the country (0.1%).⁴⁴⁶

There have been continued reports of severe violations of the right to FoRB of every major religious community in Vietnam, including Buddhists, Catholics, Cao Daists, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Protestants and Muslims.

Enforced via national and local governments and other state actors, the Vietnamese state restricts religious practice through legislation, registration requirements, harassment and surveillance.⁴⁴⁷ Vietnamese law frequently uses vaguely worded and loosely interpreted provisions and phrases such as "carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people's administration",⁴⁴⁸ making it easy to restrict FoRB on legal grounds. During the previous Universal Periodic Review cycle, the UN recommended that Vietnam clarify its laws, but it did the opposite and made the broad laws apply even more widely.⁴⁴⁹

On 1 January 2018, a new Law on Belief and Religion came into effect. This has been widely criticised for interfering in the internal affairs of religious organisations.⁴⁵⁰ All religious groups are required to register with the government and operate under its oversight. Religious groups who choose not to register with the authorities for reasons of conscience or have had their application for registration rejected or ignored, are subject to various levels of harassment, intimidation and violence. Often attacks are carried out by 'thugs' believed to be hired by local authorities to pressure unregistered groups to stop their religious activities.⁴⁵¹

In March 2018, four Christian families were attacked by mobs under the direction of the village chief following their recent conversion. They were beaten and told that unless they recanted they would be forced to leave the village. The provincial authorities of Northwest Vietnam also told them not to continue with their new faith.⁴⁵² Between 18 and 27 April 2018, members of the Evangelical Church of Christ (ECC) reported being threatened with imprisonment by local police, being told that if they

⁴⁴³ Forum 18, 'Uzbekistan: Short prison terms, fines after "show trial"', 7 August 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2304

⁴⁴⁴ Forum 18, 'Uzbekistan: Torture and impunity for torturers continues', 12 October 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2325

⁴⁴⁵ Forum 18, 'Uzbekistan: Torture and death threats unpunished', 1 May 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2374

⁴⁴⁶ USCIRF, 'Annual Report 2018', 2018, <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2018-annual-report>

⁴⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Vietnam, 32nd session, January 2019. Human Rights Watch, July 23 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/23/submission-universal-periodic-review-vietnam>

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ CSW, 'Socialist Republic of Vietnam Submission to the Universal Periodic Review', 32nd session Submission, July 2018. Pg. 1. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/17/report/4048/article.htm>

⁴⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Vietnam, 32nd session, January 2019. Human Rights Watch, July 23rd 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/23/submission-universal-periodic-review-vietnam>

⁴⁵² Open Doors, 'Vietnam: Christians Attacked, Houses Destroyed', 29 March 2018, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/vietnam-180328/>

did not give up their religious activities, they would receive the same treatment as Pastor Dao, arrested in 2016 before being sentenced to five years in prison in 2017.⁴⁵³ In January 2018, Hua Phi, leader of the Cao Dai Church, suffered health issues after being interrogated by police. Later in the month he collapsed, but authorities blocked his access to medical treatment.⁴⁵⁴ On 22 June 2018 men in civilian clothes broke into his house, beat him and cut off his beard.⁴⁵⁵

Defenders of FoRB are also heavily prosecuted. On 5 April 2018 human rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment for “carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the government.”⁴⁵⁶ In February 2018, six Hoa Hao Buddhists were sentenced to between two and six years imprisonment following a peaceful protest against the suppression of FoRB.⁴⁵⁷ Hoa Hao Buddhism is recognised by the Vietnamese government, but many Hoa Hao Buddhists refuse to belong to the state-sponsored Hoa Hao Administrative Council, which was established by the Vietnam Fatherland Front, a body under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Research suggests that independent Hoa Hao Buddhist groups and their members suffer ongoing harassment by the authorities, including confiscation of land used for religious worship, intrusive surveillance and disruption of religious activities.⁴⁵⁸

Yemen

The FoRB situation in Yemen has worsened in the last year, which comes amid a backdrop of the worst humanitarian crisis in the world⁴⁵⁹ due to the ongoing civil war. FoRB was “denied in several areas.”⁴⁶⁰ The civil war remains significant for any analysis of FoRB violations due to the differing ideologies of those in control.

The persecution of Yemeni Christians, of which there are a few thousand,⁴⁶¹ has continued across the country during over this reporting period. Yemeni Christian converts, as compared to the non-native Christian refugees, face an even higher degree of persecution and need to live their faith in secret, facing persecution from the authorities, their family, as well as some radical Islamic groups who threaten the apostates with death if they do not re-convert.

All four official church buildings in Yemen, located in Aden, which serve migrant Christians or refugees, have been damaged in the war. As a result, there are no functioning church buildings left and Christians must meet in secret locations.⁴⁶²

⁴⁵³ CSW, ‘Socialist Republic of Vietnam Submission to the Universal Periodic Review’, 32nd session Submission, July 2018. Pg. 1. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/17/report/4048/article.htm>

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid. Pg. 2.

⁴⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch, Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Vietnam, 32nd session, January 2019. Human Rights Watch, July 23rd 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/23/submission-universal-periodic-review-vietnam>

⁴⁵⁶ CSW, ‘Socialist Republic of Vietnam Submission to the Universal Periodic Review’, 32nd session Submission, July 2018. Pg. 4. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/17/report/4048/article.htm>

⁴⁵⁷ CSW. Six Vietnamese Hoa Hao Buddhists Sentenced. CSW, 12th February 2018. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/02/12/press/3839/article.htm>

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid

⁴⁵⁹ UN News, ‘Yemen’, <https://news.un.org/en/focus/yemen>

⁴⁶⁰ FCO, HRDD 2017, July 2018,

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/725552/FCO1124_Human_Rights_Report_2017_ONLINE.PDF

⁴⁶¹ Open Doors UK, ‘World Watch List: Yemen’, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/yemen/>

⁴⁶² World Watch Research, ‘Yemen’, April 2018, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/YEMEN-WWR-COUNTRY-DOSSIER-April-2018.pdf>

Furthermore, in the current humanitarian crisis, Christian converts are additionally vulnerable because emergency relief is mostly distributed through Muslim employees of secular organizations and local mosques, who are allegedly discriminating against all who are not considered to be pious Muslims.⁴⁶³

The persecution of members of the Bahá'í community – there are a few thousand in Yemen⁴⁶⁴ of both Yemeni and Iranian descent – increased to an unprecedented level over this reporting period. What began with detentions expanded to the use of torture, and finally transformed into actual threat to life. The persecution of the Bahá'ís is confined to the Houthi-controlled territories around Sana'a. According to the Bahá'í community, this is due to pressure from the Iranian Government on the Houthis to persecute the community.⁴⁶⁵

The escalation of persecution began in January 2018, when Mr Hamid bin Haydara, one of six Bahá'í prisoners currently imprisoned in Sana'a, was sentenced to death by public execution by a Houthi Specialised Criminal Court for his association with the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith. This case represents the first time in Yemeni history that someone has been officially sentenced to death for their religious beliefs.

Subsequently in March, the leader of the Houthis strongly denounced the Bahá'í faith in a speech, warning Yemenis of the “satanic” Bahá'í movement, urging Yemenis to defend their country against them. Within days a prominent Houthi strategist commented on social media that “we will butcher every Bahá'í”. Similar sentiments were expressed by religious authorities in Sana'a, including the Mufti of Yemen, Shams al-Din Muhammad Sharaf al-Din. Such incitement to violence and hatred constitutes a severe escalation of the systematic pattern of activity undertaken by the Houthis to persecute the Yemeni Bahá'ís. In September 2018 some 20 Bahá'ís were indicted at a court hearing in Houthi-controlled Sana'a. They have been falsely accused of espionage and apostasy under various pretexts. The trial is ongoing.⁴⁶⁶

There is continuing harassment of secularists and atheists. Following the murder of a secular law student in Aden in May 2017 by an unknown gunman, others have reportedly received threats from individuals accusing them of being atheists and informing them that local imams had publically called them infidels.⁴⁶⁷

For members of the Jewish community, anti-Semitic material continued to appear in print in Houthi-controlled areas. The Houthi slogan states: “God Is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam.” Reports from the Jewish community highlight that their declining numbers made it difficult to sustain their religious practices, with some media sources suggesting that only 50 Jews remain in the country.⁴⁶⁸

According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Yemen is one of the five worst scoring countries in regards of blasphemy laws that aim “to protect the state religion of Islam in a way that impermissibly discriminates among different groups.”⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶³ *ibid*

⁴⁶⁴ Baha'i International Community, 'The Baha'i Community in Yemen: A brief history of the recent persecution' August 2018, <https://www.bic.org/situation-in-yemen/background>

⁴⁶⁵ Baha'i International Community, 'UN Expert: Persecution of Baha'is in Yemen mirrors Iran's actions', 29 May 2017, <https://www.bic.org/news/un-expert-persecution-bahais-yemen-mirrors-irans-actions>

⁴⁶⁶ Baha'i World News Service, 'Baseless charges in Yemen signal intensified persecution', 18 Sept. 2018, <https://news.bahai.org/story/1285/>

⁴⁶⁷ US State Dept., 'Yemen 2017', <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281258.pdf>

⁴⁶⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁶⁹ USCIRF, 'Respecting Rights Report', 16 Aug. 2017, <https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/press-releases/uscifr-releases-report-measuring-blasphemy-laws-compliance-human-rights>