

WEA

Religious Liberty Commission



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There's Still Time to Check Rising Attacks on Tanzania's Christians

March 14, 2014

Several incidents of bombing of churches and killing of Christians have been reported in Tanzania in the recent past. While the attackers are non-state actors, the government shares the blame for failing to deal with growing religious tensions in the East African nation.

Attacks have increased in Zanzibar, which is a semi-autonomous archipelago where around 98 percent of the population is Muslim, as well as on the mainland, where Christians are supposedly more than the Muslim population.

On Feb. 24, a bomb exploded at the entrance of the Christ Church Cathedral, an Anglican church building, in Stone Town in Zanzibar, according to Morning Star News. On Feb. 23, a bomb exploded near the door of the Evangelistic Assemblies of God Zanzibar church building in Kijito Upele-Fuoni, outside Zanzibar City, just as the worship service was about to end.

A week earlier, on Feb. 15, a home-made bomb was thrown at the door of a Seventh-day Adventist church during the worship service in the Tomondo area, just a few miles from Stone Town. A day later, another such bomb was thrown at the church's doorway.

Last year, the Rev. Evaristus Mushi, a Roman Catholic priest, was shot dead in the Mtoni area outside Zanzibar City. And acid was thrown on the face and chest of a Catholic priest, the Rev. Joseph Anselmo Mwangamba, on the outskirts of Zanzibar City.

In 2012, the Rev. Ambrose Mkenda, a Catholic priest, was shot in the cheeks and the shoulder in Tomondo in the archipelago.

Such attacks have also grown on the mainland.

Last December, a Lutheran church in Korogwe town in Korogwe District and an Evangelical Assemblies of God church in Kalalani village in the same district were burnt down.

In May, a bomb exploded at the Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in Olasti, a predominantly Christian suburb of the northern city of Arusha, killing three people and injuring more than 60 others.

In March, unidentified people attacked the residence of Archbishop Valentino Mokiwa, the Bishop of Dar es Salaam and Primate of the Anglican Church of Tanzania.

In February, 45-year-old Pastor Mathayo Kachila was beheaded in the Geita Region's Buseresere town following calls by Muslim leaders to close down all Christian-owned butcheries.

In Zanzibar, attacks on Christians have been rising since the formation of the Zanzibar Government of National Unity in 2010, after the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party and the rival Civic United Front (CUF) party resolved differences. Following this, the Islamic political group UAMSHO (Association of Islamic Awareness and Public Discourse) began calling for the separation of Zanzibar from mainland Tanzania.

Most of the attacks on Christians there have been attributed to the UAMASHO.

On the mainland, supporters of a controversial cleric, Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda, who leads the group called Simba wa Mungu (God's Lion), are believed to be behind many attacks on churches. Ponda is also highly influential in Zanzibar.

Other Islamic movements – such as the Ansar al-Sunnah, which seeks a purified Islam in Tanzania, and the Tablighi Jama'at, which seeks to improve the morality of Muslim society by improving the behavior of Muslims – also exist on mainland Tanzania.

Some Islamic figures preach that Muslim traditions are under threat in a secular state, and therefore there's a need to return to the basics to protect the Islamic way of life.

The Saudis are allegedly spending about \$1 million annually in Tanzania to build new mosques and also to woo the ruling CCM party, according to a Western intelligence report.

There is also a sense of marginalization among sections of the Muslim community. Some Islamic leaders believe that although Muslims were in the forefront of the country's struggle against German and British rulers in the past, the community has not been given its due place in the country. They often use the Swahili word, "Mfumo Kristo," which roughly translates as "Christian dominance," to describe the country's politics.

Some Muslims also claim that they outnumber Christians even on the mainland. There are no official figures on the demographical composition of the country. However, according to a 2010 Pew Forum survey, roughly 60 percent of the population is Christian, 36 percent Muslim, and 4 percent are from other religious groups.

Thus far, Tanzania's Islamist forces have generally remained confined to addressing issues in their local contexts. However, visible attempts are being made by Islamist militant and terror groups operating from elsewhere in East Africa and beyond to target Muslims in Tanzania for recruitment and mobilization.

In 1998, suicide bombers linked to al-Qaeda killed 11 people in an attack on the U.S. embassy in Dar es Salaam with the involvement of some people from Zanzibar. This was an early warning sign for Tanzania.

The bombing came six years after the abolition of the single-party state through a 1992 law guaranteeing freedom of political organizations, which allowed for formation of diverse kinds

of associations. Groups that were formerly banned emerged and began to call for a more purified Islam.

Most recently, police arrested more than a dozen youngsters in the southern Mtwara area (last September) for doing armed drills, using videos of alleged training manuals by al Qaeda and al Shabaab.

Tanzania is attractive for international terror groups. It has a significant number of Muslims and it lies close to nations like Somalia, Kenya and Uganda. Black marketing of arms and weapons is rampant around the borders of Tanzania, which also has a wide-open coastline.

The president of Tanzania, Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, who is a Muslim, cannot evade responsibility for the growing sectarian tensions on the mainland or in Zanzibar.

The constitution of Tanzania and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The Zanzibar constitution also contains religious freedom provisions. And while the archipelago has its own president and constitution, it is subject to the Tanzanian constitution.

The successive governments of the country have already ignored early signs of religious intolerance, and the result is evident. Continuing to do so can be catastrophic for not only Christians but also for the nation as a whole.

Why Terrorists are after Africa's Christians

May 10, 2012

From Boko Haram in Sub-Saharan Africa to al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, Islamist terrorists across the continent have heightened attacks on Christians. This seems to be a part of an emerging strategy of al-Qaeda and associated local groups, which must be taken and dealt with seriously.

On April 29, Boko Haram members gunned down at least 16 Christians and wounded more than 22 others as they targeted an area inside the Bayero University campus in northern Nigeria where churches hold Sunday services. The same day, its gunmen shot at worshippers inside a chapel of the Church of Christ in Nigeria in the northeastern city of Maiduguri, killing the pastor who was preparing for Communion and four congregants.

Also on April 29, a man believed to be from Somalia's al-Shabaab group set off a grenade during a church service in Nairobi, Kenya, killing a worshipper and injuring 15 others.

These attacks came on the heels of the vandalism of the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church Bible School in Khartoum on April 21. About 500 alleged members of Ansaar al-Suna, a Salafi faction which adheres to a textual interpretation of Islam, attacked the church compound in the West Gerief district of the Sudanese capital, burning Bibles and destroying and looting property.

Just before the attack in Sudan was reported, an estimated 300 Christians had to flee the city of Timbuktu in Mali after Ansar Dine, an Islamist extremist group loyal to al-Qaeda, announced in the second week of April that it was imposing Sharia law in the city. This followed the previous month's military coup in northern parts of the country aided by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), an Islamist militia which aims to overthrow the Algerian government and institute an Islamic state and whose links with al-Qaeda predate the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

It is believed that Osama bin Laden was in Sudan from 1991 to 1996, when he was allegedly expelled by the Sudanese government under U.S. pressure. Al-Qaeda has had links with local groups in African nations for decades. Apart from al-Shabaab and AQIM, al-Qaeda has had direct links with the Libyan Islamic Movement (formerly known as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group) in Libya, and Somali insurgents allegedly sheltered by Eritrea.

But now, the number of such organizations is growing as al-Qaeda is desperately looking for new territories to establish its new bases in the wake of the NATO-led mission in its traditional heartland, such as Afghanistan.

The global terror group wants to create areas in African nations where it can establish its control, as well as ungoverned areas or failed states where it can operate more or less freely. To achieve this, the terror group is seeking to strengthen local Islamist groups and give them

a transnational vision and a religious motivation to carry on with their existing struggles as well as broaden the scope of their operations by including Western and Christian targets.

It is believed that al-Qaeda-linked *al-Shabaab* and AQIM provided technical sophistication and weaponry to Boko Haram, which had been targeting police stations and local people with machetes until 2010. But now, Christians are one of its primary targets and the methods includes bombing. Boko Haram killed at least 510 people and destroyed over 350 churches in 10 northern states of Nigeria last year.

In February 2012, al-Shabaab for the first time officially pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. Al-Shabaab leader Mukhtar Abu al-Zubair sent an audio message to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, saying: "On behalf of the soldiers and the commanders in al-Shabaab, we pledge allegiance to you. So lead us to the path of jihad and martyrdom that was drawn by our imam, the martyr Osama," as reported by CNN.

Al-Qaeda-linked groups in Africa, representing the global terror network locally, have established links with several other smaller local groups.

As London-based security analyst Valentina Soria, author of *Global Jihad Sustained Through Africa*, believes, "The aim is now for the central leadership [of al-Qaeda] to try to forge strategic relationships with like-minded groups in Africa ... like al-Shabab, and obviously strengthen the already existing relationship with AQIM," as quoted by the British newspaper *Daily Mail*. She adds that al-Qaeda is also working with other terror organizations to secure stable footholds in "volatile" countries.

While it was anticipated that the Arab Spring would give a blow to terrorist groups by showing that autocratic, non-Islamic regimes could be overthrown by largely peaceful protests as opposed to armed struggles, the revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa also offered some opportunities to the terror network.

The actors in the uprisings in various countries were diverse in their motives. Especially the ones who helped initiate revolutions were largely secular-minded. But extremist factions were naturally emboldened by the fall of regimes in some countries like Egypt. And then, there was, and is, widespread disillusionment among people as the transition to democracy has been chaotic. Al-Qaeda is seeking to exploit all that.

In the countries in transition from dictatorship to democracy, al-Qaeda is calling for the establishment of pure Islamic governance, saying the overthrowing of the regimes is just half work done.

Two weeks after the killing of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda released a message by its former leader, saying: "We watch with you this great historic event and we share with you joy and happiness and delight and felicity ... We are happy for what makes you happy, and we are sad for what makes you sad. So congratulations to you for your victories." Laden's message was identical to that of his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri, who said: "Your jihadi brethren are confronting alongside you the same enemy, America and its Western allies, those who set up ... Husni Mubarak, Zein al-Abidin b. Ali, Ali Abdallah Saleh, Abdallah b. Hussein [sic] and their ilk to rule over you."

Al-Qaeda finds a fertile ground in Africa, which has numerous insurgencies, volatile geopolitics, weak and corrupt governments and easy availability of arms and presence of large Muslim and Christian populations. Local militant groups also find al-Qaeda attractive in hope of recruiting more youth with a more “challenging” transnational agenda and access to sophisticated weaponry and training.

The al-Qaeda strategy apparently includes incitement to sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians as it seeks to create civil wars and unrest, such as in Nigeria.

Such attempts are likely to accelerate in the near future if the international community fails to prevent radical Muslim movements from spreading across the continent. While military aid by the West to African allies to fight radical forces might be part of the solution, but that’s not all. It would also involve ensuring good governance, strengthening of democratic institutions and organizations, and removing the underlying conditions which are conducive for terrorism.

Responding to Boko Haram's Terror in Nigeria

February 08, 2012

The Islamist terror group Boko Haram has killed numerous Christians in northern Nigeria since 2009. The killings have escalated in recent months, and security forces have clearly failed to protect lives, forcing hundreds to flee and compelling Christian leaders to call for self-defense within the limits of the law. The situation is extremely complex and sensitive, and demands a calculated response.

Boko Haram, as its activities and targets have shown, is no longer just an indigenous group fighting against corruption in the government, heavy-handedness of security forces and economic disparities between the Muslim north and Christian south. There's an evident radical religious dimension to the group, which originally sought to fight for "justice." And it appears to have linkages with global jihadist networks.

The group has targeted Christians and churches and also a U.N. building and police stations. It organized a massive prison-break to free its members in 2010. It calls for cleansing of Christians from the north and creation of an Islamic state in the region with criminal Sharia courts.

Mohammad Yusuf, the Islamist cleric who formed the group about a decade ago in Maiduguri in the northeastern state of Borno, was from the Salafi movement, which is known to have fuelled violent jihad against governments and civilians as a legitimate expression of Islam. The actual name of the group is *Jama'atul Alhul Sunnah Lidda'wati wal jihad*, which translates as "people for the propagation of the prophet's teachings and jihad." Boko Haram, which means "Western education is sin," is a name that others have used for the group because Yusuf was against Western education.

During its initial years, Boko Haram was an indigenous movement that viewed the country's non-Islamic state as illegitimate. It linked corruption in the government and the judiciary and some forms of immorality to Western education and influence. But it was not violent or ultra-radical as it is today. However, a minor incident in 2009, which was seemingly mishandled by the Nigerian government, caused the group to go underground and carry out bombings and assassinations.

In July that year, police violently reacted against Boko Haram members who were riding motor-bikes without wearing helmets. The police action led to an uprising in Bauchi state, and then in the states of Borno, Yobe, and Kano. More than 800 people died in the unrest, and Yusuf and several members of Boko Haram were executed, allegedly extra-judicially. What had been simmering among sections of the people in the north for long – due to various factors, including sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims in central parts of the country, which has killed more than 14,000 people since 1999; corruption in the government; and sustained impoverishment of the north – suddenly came to a boil.

Due to the crackdown, members of Boko Haram scattered, and since then they have had numerous factions with their own leaders instead of just one charismatic person leading the whole group. They do not have any formally defined agenda of the organization.

Analysts in Nigeria believe that Boko Haram gained technical sophistication and weaponry after it sought help, or was offered help, from groups like al-Shabaab in southern Somalia and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb following the government's military crackdown in 2009.

Boko Haram's terror escalated and Christians became one of its primary targets especially after the victory of President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south and a leader of the People's Democratic Party, in the April 2011 election. On June 7, 2011, Boko Haram attacked a church in Maiduguri. On Nov. 26, they attacked six churches. And it turned into a fierce war against the Christians by the last Christmas.

Jonathan, northerners said, ignored an unwritten but agreed-upon power-rotation agreement, according to which a Muslim should have been appointed as the president, namely the northern Muslim candidate Muhammadu Buhari. There were also complaints of rigging in the north. Over 800 people died in the unrest that followed the election. Many in the north viewed Jonathan's presidency as an evidence of the political marginalization of the north, which Boko Haram is seeking to exploit.

It appears that Boko Haram, as it has evolved into what it is today, wants political power, separation of the north from the Christian south, and creation of an Islamic state where society will be governed by Sharia in all aspects of life. It has also perhaps harbored international ambitions due to its apparent association with jihadist groups in other nations.

Violence helps Boko Haram towards achieving some of these objectives. Bombings and killings generally make a government appear weak and unable to govern. Terrorism weakens economy as businesses suffer, foreign investments decrease and military spending increases. Terrorists typically seek to arm-twist establishments into coming to the negotiating table and dominate the debate in the media.

But Christians are being targeted perhaps to make a case for the separation of the north. It can be seen as a Boko Haram's attempt to incite the Christian community to retaliate, so that it will turn into a sectarian clash. It seems Boko Haram wants Christians in the south to attack minority Muslims, which could then lead to local Muslims in the north attacking Christians. As of now, it is just Boko Haram terrorists who are killing Christians with little or no support from local Muslims.

Nigeria's Christian leaders and Christian community have shown great strength although they are going through immense suffering. They must not be ignored by the international community, especially the Christians, as they continue to comfort the families of the victims and encourage them not to resort to any sort of violence. The calls for self-defense must include encouragement to remain peaceful.

President Jonathan and local governments should be compelled, and helped, to provide security to all churches and Christian leaders in the states where Boko Haram is active. However, the political leadership must not see Boko Haram's terror as a security issue alone.

The government must also address political and economic grievances of northerners by gestures that are sincere and measurable.

While it is debatable if the United States should get directly involved in dealing with Boko Haram, it must do everything it can to assist the government of Nigeria in helping protect lives of civilians, severing Boko Haram's linkages with jihadist groups outside Nigeria, and bringing development in the north and needed reforms at the federal level.

Please also remember Nigerian Christians in your daily prayers.

Christians in Somalia Bear the Brunt of Al-Shabaab's Terror

September 16, 2011

The decapitated body of a Christian man, Juma Nuradin Kamil, was found in Bakool region of southwestern Somalia on Sept. 2. The killing, one of the numerous such incidents in recent years, comes at a time when tens of thousands of Somalis have died, and about 750,000 more are at risk of death, some of them Christians who are being denied aid, in the wake of the 21st century's worst drought in the Horn of Africa.

The Christian, whose head was severed and put on his chest, was killed by the *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (Mujahideen Youth Movement), commonly known as al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda-linked terror group that controls and runs a de facto "government" in most of southern Somalia. The group is also restricting international aid from reaching the starving population in territories under their control, especially to the Christians, WEA-RLC has learnt.

The al-Shabaab splintered from a now defunct group of Sharia courts, the Islamic Courts Union. It is fighting to overthrow the Transitional Federal Government, created in 2004 backed by the African Union, the United Nations and the United States. Since the outbreak of the 1991 civil war which overthrew President Siad Barre's regime, most parts of Somalia have had no formal government. The transitional government controls only a small part of the country.

The al-Shabaab, which generally wages war against "enemies of Islam," was created after the Islamic Courts Union was ousted by forces from neighboring Ethiopia in 2006. It had the backing of Iran, Libya, Egypt and others in the Persian Gulf region, according to a UN report. And after Ethiopia withdrew from Somalia in 2009, the al-Shabaab grew stronger and turned even more extremist.

Somalia tops the Failed States Index 2011 by Foreign Policy magazine.

The al-Shabaab imposes an extremely strict version of Sharia, or Islamic law, in southern parts under its control. In 2008, a 13-year-old girl accused of adultery, but actually gang-raped, was buried up to her neck in the field of a soccer stadium packed with spectators, and then stoned to death, according to an article in *The New Yorker*.

Recently, African Union forces were able to "drive out" al-Shabaab from the capital city of Mogadishu, but reports suggest that the militants' moving out was a tactical decision to bring about a greater destruction.

There are roughly 10 million people in Somalia, mostly Sunni Muslim. It is estimated that the country has little more than 1,000 Christians, most of them from the Bantu ethnic group. The country has no church building; Christians meet for worship underground, especially in southern parts.

The al-Shabaab particularly hates the minority followers of Sufism, which it finds “heretic,” and the miniscule Christians, who it labels as “agents of Ethiopian intelligence agencies.” The Christian-majority Ethiopia supports the interim government, although it had troubled relations with Somalia.

Agence France-Presse recently quoted an al-Shabaab spokesman, Sheikh Ali Mohamud Rage, as saying that providing aid during calamities was a “strategy” of the United Nations to “transport them [Somalis] abroad, especially in Christian countries like Ethiopia and Kenya, so that their faith can be destroyed and that they could be staff and soldiers for the Christians.”

Al-Shabaab’s hatred for Christians surpasses its concern for the lives of over four million people, the majority of them Muslim, who are affected with the drought. The group is distributing aid as per its limited capacity, but no one who is a Christian, or suspected to be one, is receiving any aid, some Christian groups have reported.

The famine has also hit the al-Shabaab, as hundreds of thousands of people who pay protection taxes to the outfit have fled its territories to Kenya and Ethiopia. And many, even within the terror group’s leadership and powerful local clan leaders, are holding the al-Shabaab responsible for the crisis, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

However, the crisis may not lead to a temporary ceasefire or lifting of the ban on international aid agencies, which could also eventually help human rights groups to discuss protection of minorities. Since the al-Shabaab is no longer a group with a centralized power and there are many factions, intervention by an outside force is extremely difficult in the absence of a true representative of the group.

While the style of functioning of one faction in one territory may be different from that of another faction in another territory, each faction is known to be equally brutal in implementing Sharia and enforcing compliance from the residents.

While there are some Sufi armed groups under the banner of Ahlu Sunna Waljama’a to fight al-Shabaab militants, Christians in Somalia have no voice or protection at all. Christians complain that even the Transitional Federal Government does not treat them well. President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, who heads the internationally recognized government, has also adopted Sharia law with death for apostasy.

The international community is rightly being blamed for the current crisis, at least partially, in terms of the response to the unprecedented drought. The same is true in case of the rising Christian persecution in Somalia.

Like there were early signs of the drought worsening in the region that once used to be the bread basket of the country, international Christian groups had been reporting on killings, rape and torture of members of the country’s most vulnerable minority. But little was done to avert either of the crises.

Despite sanctions imposed on Eritrea by the UN Security Council, it reportedly continues to supply arms to the al-Shabaab, according to a 2010 report by the UN International

Monitoring Group. If the sanctions have not proven to be effective, an alternative must be formulated.

In addition, it is widely believed that the military and police of the transitional government – though trained by the European Union, Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya – are weak and inefficient, and the administration corrupt. The government relies heavily on the roughly 8,000 troops of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

Moreover, the Transitional Federal Government occupies Somalia's seat in the United Nations, maintains embassies in 19 countries, and has fairly good relations with the West, and yet it could not be prevented from enacting laws that violate international law or encouraged to show respect for religious freedom.

Concerning the al-Shabaab, it is extremely difficult to deal with the group. But inaction is definitely not the correct response it requires. Perhaps, efforts should be made to reach out to the militants, or their various factions, for the sake of the innocent people living in the territories under its control, even if that involves making some concessions initially. Or else, a strategy should be made to gain control over al-Shabaab territories.

Sput in Christian Persecution in Algeria Needs Attention

May 30, 2011

Three months after Algeria officially lifted its 19-year-old state of emergency following public protests inspired by uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has made it clear his regime will continue to impose restrictions. Last week, authorities in eastern Béjaïa Province ordered closure of all seven Protestant churches. And three days later, a court sentenced a Christian man to five years in prison and a fine of 20,000 Algerian Dinars (US\$280) in western Oran Province.

Mustapha Krim, the president of Eglise Protestante d'Algérie or EPA (the Protestant Church in Algeria) was served a notice sent by the police on the instruction of the administrative head of Béjaïa Province on May 22. The communiqué – a copy of which WEA-RLC has obtained – stated that all places of non-Muslim worship that have not been authorised by the government will be permanently closed. Its language suggests that the government intends to close “unauthorised” places of worship “throughout the national territory” under a 2006 law.

On May 25, a criminal court in Oran’s Djamel District convicted an Algerian Christian, Siagh Krimo, for sharing his faith with and giving a Christian CD to his Muslim neighbour. Krimo, who was arrested on April 14 and is currently on bail, was given a harsh sentence despite the prosecutor’s failure to produce a witness or any evidence. A local Christian leader told WEA-RLC that he suspected pressure from high officials for Krimo’s conviction. Krimo has time until the end of this week to challenge his conviction.

In April, another Protestant church, in Makouda area in northern Tizi Ouzou Province, was served a similar notice under the 2006 law, but the authorities had not taken any action until the writing of this report.

Close to 99 percent of the 35.7 million people in Algeria are Muslim, predominantly Sunni. It is estimated that there are around 50,000 Protestants and roughly 45,000 Catholics.

According to the 2006 law – known as “Ordinance 06-03” and implemented in 2008 – any religious activity not regulated by the state is a crime. The law requires non-Muslim faiths to be practised only in state-approved places, and created a national commission on religious faiths, empowered to regulate the registration of religious associations.

The EPA, which has several churches under it, is registered with the government. But the government apparently still requires all places of worship to be “approved” by the authorities under the vaguely worded law. It is also unclear whether subordinate bodies under a registered religious organisation are also deemed as illegal.

In a report in August 2010, Amnesty International noted, “...Since the promulgation of Ordinance 06-03, the authorities have consistently refused to register Protestant churches, forcing Protestant communities in Algeria, wishing to exercise their legitimate right to manifest their religion or belief, to worship in places not approved by the state, thereby risking prosecution under the law.” To delay registration of non-Muslim organisations, the

government typically uses the excuse that an amendment to the 1973 law on associations is pending.

The constitution of Algeria protects religious freedom of non-Muslims. But it also states that Islam is the state religion and prohibits institutions from engaging in behaviour incompatible with Islamic morality – which paved the way for the state to ban evangelistic efforts with Muslims.

The three incidents – the two separate orders for the closure of churches in the provinces of Béjaïa and Tizi Ouzou, and the conviction of a man for evangelism in Oran – are part of “a campaign against the Christian faith,” a Christian leader told WEA-RLC.

WEA-RLC suspects that the crackdown on Christians and their organisations is an attempt to prevent the church from growing in the absence of restrictions that were supposed to follow the lifting of the state of emergency on February 24, 2011. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s regime had been restricting freedom of speech and assembly for two decades in the name of combating an Islamist insurgency.

A civil war between the military government and Islamist groups caused over 200,000 deaths and the disappearance of more than 7,000 people – many of them civilians – in the 1990s, rights groups say. The insurgency greatly diminished soon but Bouteflika refused to lift emergency as imposing restrictions helped him to remain in power since 1999.

It appears that President Bouteflika – who has not been very popular thanks to corruption and neglect of people’s needs by his government – wants to continue to infuse fear among the people lest they cause an uprising against his rule, the way people did in other countries in the region. Though a multi-party system of democracy, the Algerian government has been authoritarian and given little political and civil rights to its people in the garb of fighting Islamist extremism.

Although the state of emergency has been lifted, the government is not likely to respect human rights. However, the United States, as an ally, is in a position to help the people of Algeria have the rights they deserve.

The US-Algeria relations have improved tremendously following the September 11, 2001 attacks. Algeria has, since then, been supportive of the international war against terrorism and allowed the official US presence to expand.

Will Washington ask Bouteflika to show improvement in the country’s human rights record? Or will the US be lenient towards the Algerian government to continue to solicit cooperation in fighting anti-US Islamists in that country? Rights groups should press for the former.

Tackling the Root Cause of Christian Persecution in Eritrea

November 29, 2010

Eritrea, one of Africa's newest and smallest countries, has jailed, tortured and killed numerous evangelical protestant Christians over the last eight years. Concerns over Christian persecution have been raised at various international forums, but there has been little change in the attitude and policy of the one-party government. That's because the root cause of growing religious restrictions in the country remains intact.

The man behind religious persecution, Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki, is a "Christian." He is a member of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, an Oriental Orthodox church, in the capital city of Asmara – belonging to the largest among the only three Christian denominations allowed to function in the country. However, 64-year-old Afewerki has the reputation of being an alcoholic, and a ruthless autocrat.

Afewerki, the leader of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party, not only targets "unregistered" Christian groups, but also the leadership of his own denomination, the (Coptic) Orthodox Church of Eritrea, as well as "unrecognised" non-Sunni Muslims and followers of the Baha'i faith.

Afewerki's policy of restrictions is more about his fear that religion will mobilize people than religion per se. In other words, he wants to restrict and pre-empt any formation of people's association.

This is why the government has not allowed any political opposition in the country or civil society – there are no protests or unions either. Anyone who has openly criticized the government or tried to mobilize people for a cause has been jailed or had to flee the country. There is no privately-owned news media because impartial news organizations are seen as a tool of the United States intelligence CIA.

The government sees democracy as a threat to the nation's unity and stability, on which Afewerki has concentrated its efforts in his 17 years of rule – without seeking people's approval by an election.

Afewerki's anxiety – real or pretentious – can be seen against the backdrop of the complex geopolitics in the Horn of Africa (Northeast Africa containing the countries of Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia).

Eritrea's strategic importance – it has a 1,150-km Red Sea coastline and abundant mineral resources (nearly 60 percent of the lands in Eritrea have minerals including emeralds and gold) – has been like a curse in disguise. It has been invaded and colonized by many external forces, including the Arabians, the Turks, the Portuguese and the Egyptians, and more recently, by the British and the Italians. After the colonial powers left, Eritrea was annexed by its giant neighbor, Ethiopia, in 1952. Eritrea gained independence in 1991 after a 30-year war. But border disputes with Ethiopia still remain.

Since Afewerki became the President in 1993, his government imposed severe civil and political restrictions citing threat from Ethiopia as the prime national interest. Presidential elections were planned for 1997, but they were not held under the same disguise.

Particularly after a war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000 – which cost Eritrea around 70,000 lives – Afewerki, who led the country to independence from Ethiopia, became over-suspicious and a lot more autocratic.

As part of its policy of extreme caution against external threats, the government in 2002 imposed restrictions also on religious groups other than the four recognized religious denominations – the Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Sunni Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (Lutheran). The government asked unregistered groups to furnish financial and membership details as an excuse to outlaw them.

By imposing restrictions, the government sought to target mainly Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian denominations, which grew in numbers during the two-year war with Ethiopia. Many youngsters in the army – mainly those serving under the nation's compulsory national service programme – became followers of these denominations and would meet secretly for prayer and Bible study. But the government was nervous about youth with military background meeting together.

The government's concern remains till today. Although most groups submitted the details sought by the government and applied for registration, the ban remains active till today.

For similar reasons, the recognized churches also faced intrusion and still aren't allowed to criticize any government policy. In 2005, when Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church spoke against state interference in the church's internal matters, he was put under house arrest and replaced by another church leader.

The government also fears – or claims to do so – that religious freedom will lead to evangelism by Christian groups and thereby cause social tensions which can be exploited by “outside forces” to destabilize the nation. The Muslims – the eastern and western lowlands – and the Christians – mainly highlanders – are equal in number in the country, and this balance is seen as a key factor that has kept communal violence at bay. Eritrea has a population of over 5 million.

Due to its alleged fears, the Eritrean government has imprisoned tens of thousands of people, mainly for political and religious reasons, and tortured and killed many of them extra-judicially. It is estimated that between 2,000 and 3,000 Christians are in Eritrean prisons.

The Constitution of Eritrea, which provides freedom of religion for all faiths, was ratified in 1997 but has not been implemented – for the same excuse that the nation is under threat.

Ethiopia is the main but not the only source of fear for Eritrea. Eritrea has troubled relations with most of its neighbours – Sudan, Ethiopia, Yemen, Somalia and Djibouti. Relations are strained also with the United States, the European Union as well as the African Union.

In 2009, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Eritrea for its support of the Somali Islamic insurgency – Islamist groups like al-Shabab and Hisbul-Islam, which see Ethiopia as an enemy, are fighting for control of the capital city of Mogadishu. In protest, Eritrea suspended its membership of the African Union alleging that the United States was behind the move.

Afewerki dislikes the United States because Ethiopia is a strategic partner in the global war on terror and Washington has allegedly neglected the grievances Eritrea has had with Ethiopia concerning the border dispute.

The State of Eritrea is believed to be crumbling given its isolation and economically poverty (as per the latest Global Hunger Index, Eritrea is among the world's top 10 countries with the worst levels of hunger), though gradually. It is highly doubtful that the Afewerki government will be able to sustain the unity and stability of the nation with its authoritarian rule for much longer. Analysts say citizens inside the country and the Eritrean diaspora are losing patience and may rise up against the authoritarian government. Especially those compelled to serve in the army may pose a threat to the government. If Afewerki's government falls, as a result of a people's movement, it will take a heavy toll on people's lives, including that of Christians, as the government will overreact.

More desirable will be change through cautious engagement with Eritrea by nations and blocs that care for democracy and prosperity in that country. However, no engagement without helping minimize tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia can be fruitful. Once that happens, the nation will have to eventually implement the constitution, hold multi-party elections, release political and religious prisoners and grant equal rights to adherents of all faiths.

Americas

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February 2013 - *Why Christian Persecution Remains Despite Reforms in Cuba*

Why Christian Persecution Remains Despite Reforms in Cuba

February 1, 2013

Cuba has shown some relatively significant signs of economic and political transformation since Raúl Castro's official election as President in February 2008, but the nation's communist government still persecutes Christians and crushes dissent.

While Raúl Castro has the same objective as his predecessor and brother Fidel Castro – to pass on the legacy of the Revolution to the next generation – the incumbent president believes the country should have private farmers' markets, legalize the dollar, allow self-employment, gradually end the isolation, and compete globally.

Therefore, as Raúl Castro begins his second five-year term as president this month, some positive developments can be seen. For example, immigration authorities are now processing passports for Cubans to travel abroad, and citizens can also retain their property and residence status if they live or work outside of Cuba. Besides, about half of the nation's economy is expected to be in private hands within five years.

Moreover, in the general election this month, a little less than three-fourth of the candidates for the 612 seats are newcomers, most of who were born after the Cuban Revolution. And about half of the candidates are women.

Cuba, which has been governed by a one-party state ever since Fidel Castro overthrew the U.S.-supported dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, is also strengthening relations with Brazil and the Catholic Church, apparently to open up new economic and social spaces for Cubans.

However, Raúl Castro's reforms agenda is apparently not due to calls for transformation by the United States, and nor does it seek to please Washington, which has had an embargo on all trade and commercial transactions with Cuba for over half a century. On the contrary, the reforms are being brought in mostly for domestic reasons and have been supplemented with safeguards against "interference" by the United States.

Around the time when Raúl Castro was elected by the National Assembly as President in 2009, tensions between Cuba and the United States peaked with the arrest of U.S. citizen Alan Gross, a USAID contractor who was tried and convicted of attempting to destabilize the communist regime through a U.S.-sponsored program.

The United States' economic embargo on Cuba continues to impose indiscriminate hardship on the Cuban people, and has done nothing to improve human rights in Cuba, the Human Rights Watch remarks in its 2013 report, and points to the United Nations General Assembly

in November, 2012, where 188 of the 192 member countries voted for a resolution condemning the U.S. embargo.

In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama enacted reforms to eliminate limits on travel and remittances by Cuban Americans to Cuba, which had been put in place during the administration of President George W. Bush. In 2011, Obama used his executive powers to ease “people-to-people” travel restrictions, allowing religious, educational, and cultural groups from the US to travel to Cuba. However, in May 2012 the Obama administration established additional requirements to obtain “people to people” licenses, which has reduced the frequency of such trips.

It’s not surprising, therefore, that alongside positive developments, political arrests in the country also jumped to more than 6,600 in 2012 – the highest in decades, according to the Havana-based Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation. There was also a dramatic increase in violations of freedom of religion or belief in the country last year, says a report by London-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), pointing out that 120 cases of religious freedom were reported in the year – up from a total of 30 in 2011.

However, while the persecution of Christians and dissidents remains, it is now low-profile and low-intensity. For example, authorities no longer slap critics with long prison sentences, but short-term arbitrary arrests are still widespread. Similarly, Cuba has largely moved away from the targeting of Christians and churches the way authorities under Fidel Castro did, but legal restrictions and surveillance are still there.

According to Operation World, of the roughly 11 million people in Cuba, an estimated 6 million are Christian, with Catholics as the majority, and about 1 million are evangelicals. The actual number could be higher, as the church appears to be growing fast.

The Cuban government still largely controls religious groups through legal restrictions and government-authorized surveillance and harassment, and at times detention, of religious leaders, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The government requires religious communities to undergo an invasive registration procedure. Only registered religious communities are allowed to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply for international travel for religious purposes. Besides, local Communist Party officials must approve all registered groups’ religious activities.

A ban on all political organizing continues, and political dissent in any form is still a punishable offense, according to Washington, D.C.-based Freedom House. The news media is still owned and controlled by the state, and access to the Internet is also tightly controlled until today. Rights of assembly and association cannot be “exercised against the existence and objectives of the Socialist State.” The Council of State, led by Raúl Castro, controls the courts and the judicial process as a whole.

For the Cuban government to introduce some legal reforms and allow civil rights, it would perhaps require a sense of lesser threat from the United States now that the island nation is opening up.

While resumption of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States would involve a long process because it a politically divisive issue for the latter, even a little progress in the two countries' ties – even if that requires Washington to take some unilateral steps – can help lift some more restrictions in the Caribbean nation.

Central Asia

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Religious Restrictions Likely to Worsen in Tajikistan

January 31, 2014

Tajikistan shares a long and porous border with Afghanistan, where a surge in Islamist activity is feared as the number of U.S. troops drops significantly in just a few weeks from now. This threat can provide a pretext to President Emomali Rahmon to get tougher with religious groups.

The former Soviet nation of Tajikistan is a Tier 1 Country of Particular Concern, as per the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). This designation refers to those governments that have engaged in or tolerated “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom – violations that are “systematic, ongoing, and egregious.”

Conditions for religious groups, including and especially evangelical Christians, might deteriorate even further as the drawdown of U.S. troops falls from 66,000 to 34,000 in Afghanistan in February possibly leading to a major Taliban push to retake power.

After 2014, the American presence in Afghanistan is expected to further come down to about 6,000-10,000 U.S. trainers and counterterrorism forces, assisted by about 5,000 partner forces performing similar missions.

“There are fears that the Taliban and other insurgents will achieve success against Afghan forces once the international force is reduced substantially by late 2014,” acknowledged a Jan. 17 U.S. Congressional report, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy.”

After the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan was reduced from 100,000 in June 2011 to about 66,000 by September 2012, consequences were evident. The civilian casualty toll there increased by 23 percent in the first six months of 2013, according to the U.N.

Presidential elections in Afghanistan are scheduled for April 5, but with President Hamid Karzai barred from running for a third term as per the nation’s constitution and no successor in sight, one doesn’t know what to expect after a new government is in place. While efforts are on to encourage the Taliban to participate in the elections, the insurgent group has thus far remained determined to obstruct the polls.

Tajikistan, which fears that the anticipated resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan will likely promote Islamic militancy within and around its territories, has already started preparing to fight the threat militarily. Russia, which protects the Tajik-Afghan border, is also reportedly increasing its military support to the Tajik army.

For Islamist extremists in Afghanistan and elsewhere, Tajikistan has been a fertile ground for recruitment thanks to its large ill-educated, unemployed population. Therefore, the reaction of President Rahmon's government in Dushanbe, which has long been using the threat of Islamic militancy as a pretext to impose severe restrictions on religious groups, is not difficult to predict.

Restrictions have existed in the nation, but they appear to be constantly growing.

Following its independence from the Soviet Union, Tajikistan witnessed a civil war waged by liberal democratic reformists and Islamists between 1992 and 1997, which resulted in the death of over 100,000 people.

Rahmon, a former Soviet Communist Party official, has been the nation's president since 1992. Like his counterparts elsewhere in the Central Asian region, he is seen as an authoritarian ruler, and as one who refuses to recognize citizens' basic human rights in the garb of protecting national security and social stability.

In 2003, Rahmon had a referendum in favour of allowing him to run for two consecutive seven-year terms beginning with the 2006 elections. He won the elections in November 2006, which were neither free nor fair according to the international observers, and began tightening religious restrictions. His government banned the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Abundant Life Christian Centre in Dushanbe in 2007.

In 2009, the Rahmon government enacted a highly restrictive religion law, misnamed as "The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations."

Under the law, unregistered religious activity and private religious education are banned, and so is proselytism. Religious instructions can be provided only after state permission, and children must have a written permission from both parents to receive instruction that has been approved by the state.

The legislation also states that religious literature can be imported only after the government has approved its content and quantity. Religious groups importing literature need to pay the government for checking its content. And religious groups cannot invite foreigners without prior approval from the government.

The penalties under the law range between a prison term up to 12 years and heavy fines to the tune of US \$1,600.

In July 2012, the government introduced new penalties for receiving religious education abroad, preaching and teaching religious doctrines, establishing connections with foreign religious organizations, or conducting activities not listed in a group's registration charter, according to the USCIRF.

In 2011, the government enacted the "Parental Responsibility Law," which prohibits almost all religious activity, including attendance at worship service, by children. The law also restricts parents from choosing certain names for their children.

The country's criminal code also penalizes extremist, terrorist, or revolutionary activities even if they do not involve violence or incitement to imminent violence. And the code doesn't define what extremism is, leaving it open for the authorities to use their own discretion.

Of Tajikistan's population of about 7 million, roughly 6.6 million are Muslim, mostly Sunni from the Hanafi school of Islam. There are about 74,000 Christians, mostly Russian Orthodox, and around 7,000 evangelicals, according to Operation World.

While the government maintains tight control over all religious groups and their activities, it views Christianity, especially the evangelical faith, as a foreign or Western religion that is not compatible with the nation's culture.

Tajikistan has reasons for concern about the threat of Islamic militancy due to the forthcoming pullout of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. For example, the nation's authorities detained 118 members of alleged terrorist and extremist groups in 2013, media quoted Deputy Interior Minister Abdurakhmon Buzmakov as saying earlier this month – though we do not know on what basis these arrests were made.

The perception of the threat, however, does not justify restrictions or a crackdown on religious practise by its people. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to which Tajikistan is party, states, "OSCE participating States have committed themselves to non-discrimination on the issue of Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion, or Belief for all within their territory, without distinction as to race, gender, language or religion."

International organizations and human rights groups need to watch and address these serious developments in Tajikistan.

Religious Repression Carries on Unabated in Turkmenistan

September 6, 2013

Turkmenistan has been one of the most repressive countries in the world for over two decades, as key international actors continue to sideline the issue of religious and other freedoms due to their thirst for cheap energy. This Muslim-majority Central Asian nation possesses the world's fourth largest reserves of natural gas resources.

Like some other countries in this region, Turkmenistan is “reminiscent of the old Soviet Union” as it commits serious human rights violations, “particularly through enacting and enforcing laws against freedom of religion or belief,” Katrina Lantos Swett and M. Zuhdi Jasser, Vice Chairs of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), wrote in an op-ed article in The Moscow Times recently.

On Aug. 29, Forum 18 reported that police raided a children's summer camp run by a Baptist church on its own premises in the south-eastern town of Mary. Police and other officials, including a cameraman, questioned the children, took food samples, ordered the camp closed and handed down two fines, it said.

Raids, detentions, fines, torture and threats are some words that often appear in stories of persecution that come out of Turkmenistan.

While religious repression cuts across Central Asia, Turkmenistan stands out due to its unabated disrespect for civil and political freedoms since the rule of dictatorial President Saparmurat Niyazov.

Niyazov, who was known for imposing his personal eccentricities upon the country, took office in January 1990 and ruled the country with an iron fist until his sudden death in December 2006.

Niyazov's successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, the incumbent president, revoked some of the policies of his predecessor and sought to establish relations with the West. However, he, too, retained unchallenged power. His family members and associates continue to have unlimited power and control over all aspects of public life. In the sham presidential election in February 2012, Berdymukhamedov claimed he received 97 percent of the vote.

A legacy of Niyazov, Turkmenistan believes in an evolutionary approach to reforms – the claim that political and economic stability alone can ensure smooth transition. And in the name of stability, even basic rights of citizens are violated and justified, while democracy and individual freedoms are branded as Western ideals fit only for the developed world.

As a result of Turkmenistan's refusal to introduce genuine reforms and continued policy of promoting an ethnically homogeneous Turkmen-speaking Turkmen national culture, the country has gone from extremely bad to worse over the years.

"With the demise of the Soviet Union hastened by democratic opposition across the region a generation ago, we hoped that also meant the end of religious repression in that region of the world," the USCIRF officials said in the op-ed. "But in too many post-Soviet states today, the ghost of Soviet control over peaceful religious life is alive and well."

Turkmenistan remains one of the world's most repressive countries, says the 2013 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW). "The country is virtually closed to independent scrutiny," it notes. "Media and religious freedoms are subject to draconian restrictions, and human rights defenders and other activists face the constant threat of government reprisal. The authorities continue to use imprisonment as a tool for political retaliation and to restrict peoples' right to travel freely."

In its 2013 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders has ranked Turkmenistan as having the 3rd worst press freedom conditions in the world, behind only North Korea and Eritrea.

The state controls all media in Turkmenistan, and foreign media often do not have access to the country. The Internet is heavily controlled, and the country's only Internet service provider is state-operated.

The ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan is the only party that can effectively operate in the country. Political gatherings are deemed illegal if they are held without government approval. Dissent is not tolerated, and severely punished.

The justice system is not independent either, and trials are closed in political cases.

While the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, in practice, no religious group, apart from Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox Church, enjoy religious freedom, according to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

More than 90 percent of the population of Turkmenistan is Muslim, mostly Sunni. Christians are estimated to be about 9 percent, with Russian Orthodox Church as the largest Christian denomination.

According to the 1991 Law of Turkmenistan on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, all religious groups are required to register with the Ministry of Justice. An amendment to the law, introduced in October 1995, required that the request for registration be signed by not less than 500 Turkmen citizens of at least 18 years of age – a provision that apparently targeted small religious groups, including Protestant and evangelical groups. After the amendment, all registered groups, except the Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox, lost their registration.

While registration is not possible for many groups, unregistered religious activity is an offence under Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences. It contains fines that are between

five and 10 times the minimum monthly wage for refusing to register a religious community or participating in an unregistered religious community. Fines double in the case of a repeat offender.

Publishing religious material is virtually impossible in the country, as authorities routinely confiscate religious literature. It is, therefore, extremely difficult for many believers to acquire even a copy of the Bible.

The government has co-opted sections of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has helped the authorities in their crackdown on smaller, unregistered Protestant and evangelical groups in the past, according to Forum 18.

However, despite being a highly repressive republic, Turkmenistan continues to expand relations with foreign governments and international organizations without having to correct its human rights record, HRW noted in its report.

The European Union's Partnership Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Turkmenistan was frozen in 1998 over human rights concerns. But the EU continues to press forward with the agreement without requiring any human rights reforms in exchange. While the European Parliament has held up approval of the agreement, some believe it will eventually be ratified because the EU is seeking to diversify its energy supply.

In 2008, the European Parliament framed human rights benchmarks as a precondition for the EU's relations with Turkmenistan. Therefore, the EU must not let its relations with Turkmenistan grow more than the latter's respect for human rights and genuine improvement in the civil and political atmosphere in that country. Any discrepancy in this equation can rightly be seen as holding of double standards.

Religious Censorship will Heighten Terror Threat in Kyrgyzstan

July 30, 2012

The former Soviet nation of Kyrgyzstan is in the process of further tightening religious censorship with the alleged objective to check growing extremism and terrorism, ignoring warnings that such a move will help, rather than hinder, violent Islamist groups to remain and grow in the country.

Proposed amendments to the existing 2009 Religion Law, which seek to grant state organs almost complete control over religious literature, are likely to be finalized in September, according to Forum 18 News. The country's parliament will also be in session from Sept. 3.

A new clause that is being proposed for addition to the law, states, "Control on the import, production, acquisition, storage and distribution of printed materials, film, photo, audio and video productions, as well as other materials with the purpose of unearthing religious extremism, separatism and fundamentalism is conducted by the plenipotentiary state organs for religious affairs, national security and internal affairs."

As U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said at a press conference on July 10 during her first visit to Kyrgyzstan that "discrimination, especially on ethnic, religious and gender grounds, remains a deeply problematic issue" in this country, many fear that the government wants to use the new clause to bring import, publishing and distribution of all religious literature under its control, and use the censorship against religious denominations it is biased against.

The bill was introduced in parliament in June 2011, and is currently being revised after President Almazbek Sharshenovich Atambayev rejected the bill, objecting to a requirement that religious organizations be involved in the proposed new Co-ordinating Expert Committee to oversee the censorship. Initially, the bill had called for the country's two largest religious organizations - the state-backed Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church - to help in carrying out the censorship. Their mention was later deleted.

If the two religious groups were to be asked to assist the government in censorship, that would lead to religious monopoly and hegemony as far as smaller denominations, such as Protestant Christian groups, are concerned. And if the final draft of the bill provides for appointment of experts to do the same, that too would allow the government to discriminate against smaller groups and virtually disable them from using religious literature. The Kyrgyz State has been known for its bias towards the two largest religious organizations for years.

The government is also known to have been biased against the ethnic Uzbek minority, which mostly lives in southern parts of the country. About 70 percent of the roughly 5.5 million

people in Kyrgyzstan are ethnic Kyrgyz. Roughly 10 percent of the population is ethnic Uzbek, seen as devout Muslims. The rest are ethnic Slavs, Dungans, Uighurs and other ethnic groups.

In June 2010, a violent clash between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern city of Osh left around 500 dead and hundreds of thousands displaced, mostly Uzbeks. The violence erupted soon after a revolution overthrew former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010. Uzbeks participated in the revolution as they didn't like Bakiyev, a nationalist who cared little for minorities.

Ethnic tensions remain even today, and the government has been accused of arresting and torturing Uzbeks in the cases related to the 2010 violence although the minority bore the brunt during the unrest. U.N.'s Pillay also raised the issue during her visit to Kyrgyzstan.

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have had border disputes for about two decades, and some terror attacks in Uzbekistan have been blamed on Islamist groups operating from inside Kyrgyzstan.

The repressive 2009 religion law was brought in force after the then Kyrgyz government perceived a heightened threat from the Islamist terror group *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HT) in southern parts of the country. The government planned a Presidential Decree curbing key religious freedoms in early 2008, and carried out a heavy-handed campaign in the south against Islamic extremism. Residents of the village of Nookat in Osh Province, who were denied permission to even celebrate a Muslim holiday, held protests.

The government reacted by enacting a new law on religion, replacing the proposed 2008 decree. The law provided for mandatory registration of all religious groups with a tough requirement for the signatures of 200 members who should be Kyrgyz citizens, introduced wide-ranging bans on "proselytism," required state examination of all imported religious materials as well as those distributed or placed in a library, provided for written permission from local authorities for use of premises by religious groups, banned children from being active in religious organizations, and put restrictions on participation of foreigners in religious activities.

It is difficult to believe that President Atambayev, in office since Dec. 1, 2011 and former prime minister of the country, actually believes - or his predecessors did - that the government can check Islamist terror groups in the country by restricting fundamental rights.

Any security expert would say, and President Atambayev would certainly know, that groups like the HT seek to sell the dream of establishing an Islamic caliphate as an alternative to a government that is widely perceived as corrupt and authoritarian. Both the elements can be found in the successive governments of Kyrgyzstan. Many Kyrgyz citizens believe that government's authoritarian and restrictive moves are rooted in its desire to stay in power against people's wishes.

President Atambayev must have also been informed by his security experts that a key reason why terror groups launch attacks is to compel the government to react in a knee-jerk manner, as governments often do by stereotyping a particular group of people or by restricting their fundamental rights or by using heavy-handed police action. This helps terror groups to convince sections of the people to join their struggle against the "unjust" government and recruit more people.

Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and is therefore bound to implement its commitments to strengthen freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental freedoms. OSCE members must be held accountable in some way for not keeping their commitments.

On its part, the United States, which leases the Manas airbase in northern Kyrgyzstan as a transit point for forces in Afghanistan, must also speak out, and thus balance its interests with its concerns for human rights in that country.

The Kyrgyz government must be urged by all nations that care for civil rights and democracy in the world to repeal the 2009 legislation on religion, instead of making it even harsher, and thereby show its commitment to the OSCE and protect the region's security.

Trouble Ahead for Christians in Azerbaijan?

June 1, 2012

Azerbaijani President Ilham H. Aliyev will seek his third-consecutive re-election in October 2013. Seen by many as a dictator, the president of this Shi'a-majority nation began to lay the groundwork for the next election by restricting civil and political rights soon after he was re-elected in 2008. And now as the election is closer, he can be expected to further tighten the noose on freedoms.

Growing criticism by human rights groups notwithstanding, the former Soviet nation of 9.2 million people has increasingly shown signs of authoritarianism – from widespread corruption perpetuated by a lack of accountability and transparency to harassment of journalists, bloggers and opposition members with total impunity. And among the targets of the regime are non-traditional Protestant Christian groups.

On May 12, police raided a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Gynaja, interrogated church members and children, and imposed heavy fines on a congregant without going to a court, Forum 18 reported. The agency also reported that a court in the capital city of Baku on April 25 ruled to liquidate the Greater Grace Protestant Church when no church representative was at the hearing. Further, it was learnt that authorities were sitting on license applications of about 100 shops wishing to sell religious books.

A presidential election is far more important than parliamentary polls in Azerbaijan, where legislature has little power as compared to the president's office. The Aliyev regime will likely make every effort to ensure victory. And the efforts could involve a greater crackdown on religious groups.

Perhaps this is why the government has announced that it is facing a serious threat from Islamist terror groups. The National Security Ministry on May 30 claimed it thwarted a series of ambitious terrorist attacks planned during a recent Eurovision Song Contest. The ministry said targets included major hotels housing foreign tourists, and an assassination attempt on President Aliyev, according to The Associated Press.

The government has in recent months made similar claims that al-Qaeda-linked groups and even Iran were involved in terror activities inside Azerbaijan, which is not very friendly with Tehran despite being a Shi'a-majority nation.

With domestic laws that help the government to “legally” harass religious groups and civil and political activists, the “Islamist terror” threat might become a pretext.

In less than six months after his re-election in October 2008, President Aliyev restricted the freedom of the press and removed the two-term limit for the presidency by a constitutional referendum in March 2009, to pave the way to run again in 2013. The same year, the regime also enacted legal amendments to reduce the space for religious groups and non-governmental organizations.

The Religion Law states that freedom is subject to public order and stability in vague and wide terms, requires that religious organizations be registered with the government, and provides for a burdensome registration process, according to the U.S.-based Freedom House. The law also puts many vague riders on the right of religious groups to provide religious education to their members, especially children.

Laws also mandate NGOs to register with the Ministry of Justice to be able to function with a legal entity, and procedures laid down for registration are cumbersome and nontransparent. NGOs must also register their grants with the government and foreign NGOs must reach agreements with the government, laws require.

The majority of the media in Azerbaijan are owned or controlled by the government or groups and individuals allied to it. And the government has created conditions that would make it difficult for independent media groups to function and survive.

The existence of courts brings no hope to the citizens, as the judiciary is largely subservient to the government.

Since 2009, the government and its agents have heightened crackdown on journalists and bloggers, arresting them under criminal provisions of defamation, terrorism and inciting hate. Many have been attacked with total impunity.

Restrictions paid political dividends to President Aliyev, who took charge of the country after the death of his father Heidar Aliyev, a former Soviet communist leader who ruled for the majority of years from 1969 with an iron fist. In the 2010 parliamentary election, in which European observers found numerous irregularities, all the 125 seats went to the ruling New Azerbaijan Party and independents loyal to it. The opposition parties of Musavat and Azerbaijani Popular Front have no presence in parliament.

What one sees on the ground is in contrast to the stated ideology of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party, i.e. lawfulness, secularism (not in the Western sense), and nationalism; the constitution, which provides for the right to practice, choose and change one's religious belief and form religious groups; and international obligations of the country, which is a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council and a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

It's a nation that takes pride in being the first democratic and secular republic in the Muslim world, and the first Muslim-majority country to allow and appreciate theater and other arts. Some even see this nation as one of the most liberal majority-Muslim nations. However, with its autocratic rule, Azerbaijan is far from being an example for any nation in the world.

According to a diplomatic cable dispatched by the U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan and uncovered by WikiLeaks, President Aliyev was compared to a mafia crime boss.

Instead of shying away from openly criticizing the Azerbaijani government, the international community – especially the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the United States, and other international and regional institutions and partners – must call a spade a spade, and do that publicly, followed by action.

Christians May Face More Restrictions in Kazakhstan

August 18, 2011

The government of the former Soviet nation of Kazakhstan seems to be fostering the fear of Islamist extremism to further restrict civil rights, including religious freedom, WEA-RLC has learnt. It appears that the Kazakh parliament, a rubber stamp for President Nursultan Abishuly Nazarbayev, is preparing to strengthen the government's grip over religious groups and activities.

In Kazakhstan, the world's largest landlocked country, all religious groups are required to register with the government. Under Administrative Code Articles 374-1 and 375, local authorities can penalize activities of unregistered organizations with fines or detention. And the Ministry of Justice can deny registration on the basis of an insufficient number of members or if its charter violates the law. In addition, the Law on Extremism empowers the government to designate a group as an extremist organization, ban its activities and penalize its members.

As if this was not sufficient, the Kazakh parliament in 2008 passed the "Law on Amendments and Additions to Several Legislative Acts on Questions of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations," increasing the harshness of penalties for unregistered religious activities. However, the constitutional court annulled the amendment.

It is this amendment that may be re-introduced, albeit with a change in the terminology perhaps, as the issue is found in the 2011 schedule of the parliament. And to apparently make the country's environment conducive for further repression, Islamist extremism is being projected as a major threat.

Of the 16.4 million people in Kazakhstan, roughly 70 percent are Muslim, the vast mostly of which are Sunni Muslim from the Hanafi school of Islam. Around 26 percent of the population is Christian, mostly from the Russian Orthodox denomination. Many Protestant churches also exist and are registered with the government. But some have chosen not to. The latter include some Pentecostal and Baptist groups and they are seen with suspicion by the authorities as well sections of the population. For example, a Baptist pastor was fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage for holding religious worship in the Taraz city in March. Ahmadiyyas, Shi'as, Jehovah's Witnesses and some Hindu groups also face oppression.

On August 16, Central Asia Online quoted a domestic policy official, Gulzhiyan Suleimenova, as saying that activities of untraditional religious movements were responsible for extremism and terrorism. The statement came following conviction of 12 people for terror activities by a court. While Muslim minority groups are the main target of the government, untraditional and unregistered groups in general will also get affected.

On August 12, an influential organization, the Union of Muslims of Kazakhstan, locally known as SMK, called for the creation of Muslim public order forces to counter extremism in the country. "Senior SMK members believe that the spread of Islamic extremism must be

countered primarily by representatives of the Muslim community,” the Union said in a statement.

On June 17, Gazeta.kz quoted the chairman of Kazakh Agency for Religious Affairs, Kairat Lama Sharif, as saying that he would work on development of moderate Islam in Kazakhstan based on the principle of “one nation, one religion.” According to Forum 18, President Nazarbayev has also called for increased surveillance of religious communities.

Islamist extremism is believed to have grown in Central Asia, including in the countries neighboring Kazakhstan. One explanation why the Kazakh government is particularly concerned is that the country has large oil, gas, and mineral reserves and therefore more foreign investors. To alleviate concerns of the investors in the oil and natural gas industry, the government will need to deal with it harshly.

However, another reason could be that the 71-year-old president wants to exploit the issue, as there is no substantial evidence of large presence of a terror group. There seems to be some presence of the Hizb ut-Tahrir outfit, but its strength remains in question. Eric McGlinchey, a political science professor at George Mason University who studies Islamic movements in Central Asia, recently told *The Diplomat* that there were far fewer such movements in Kazakhstan than in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and circumstantial evidence in a handful of incidents shouldn’t lead observers to believe there’s an Islamist terror threat emerging in Kazakhstan now.

There is also a reason to suspect that President Nazarbayev could be using the fear of extremism, even if it is real, as an excuse to turn down calls for reforms. He has been in office since the country’s independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Like any other authoritarian country, Kazakhstan has grossly violated freedom of the press, the independence of judiciary, the right to form associations and the right of the people to protest as well as prevented a culture of democracy from taking birth – all apparently to maintain the president’s hold on power. President Nazarbayev in 2007 oversaw passing of a law virtually granting his office an indefinite term, immunity from criminal prosecution, and say in domestic as well as foreign policy.

While curbing or preempting terrorism is a noble cause, the means are equally important. There are alternatives to deal with or block attempts, if any, of extremists to gain ground in Kazakhstan. For example, the United States and the West in general would be more than willing to help the country with its intelligence capabilities.

Kazakhstan needs to be reminded, yet again, that the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), whose chairmanship this country had in 2010, involves a commitment to ensure full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; to abide by the rule of law; to promote the principles of democracy by building, strengthening and protecting democratic institutions; and to promote tolerance throughout the OSCE region. On the contrary, Kazakhstan, though a secular state as per its constitution, is on the list of countries “closely monitored” by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, along with Bangladesh and Morocco.

The OSCE, the European Union, which has been a trade partner of Kazakhstan since 2002, and the United States, which has been a strategic partner since the 9/11 attacks, have at least

some leverage over President Nazarbayev. They should prevent him from flouting international commitments any further.

Kazakhstan needs reforms and freedom, not more restrictions. This is what the international community needs to say, louder.

Uzbek Christians Suffer as Regime Tightens Noose

June 24, 2011

At least four incidents of Christian persecution were reported from the former Soviet country of Uzbekistan this week. A Christian woman was beaten into concussion, another woman was fined \$1,465 by a court for giving the New Testament to a child, a Christian man was threatened with axe attack by a police official and another man was assaulted by police.

The spurt can be linked to renewed attempts to maintain hold on power and the communist legacy in this most populous country of Central Asia by its president, Islam Karimov, who has remained in office through controversial referendums since 1991. Karimov's objectives can be met only under an authoritarian rule where the executive has powers over all other State institutions including the judiciary and that's what best describes the government of Uzbekistan.

While the people of Uzbekistan do not seem to be in a position to emulate the ongoing revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa, President Karimov cannot underestimate the threat. The conditions that led to the wave of revolutions late last year and earlier this year – poverty, corruption, unemployment and authoritarianism – all exist in Uzbekistan as well. Karimov will never admit it, but at the same time he will leave no stone unturned to pre-empt any attempt by the people of his country to plan a revolt.

Karimov, the dictatorial president of the Sunni-majority country with over 28 million people, intensified restrictions on civil rights under the pretext of fighting Islamist extremism after the Islamic Jihad Union outfit targeted government installations in the Fergana Valley and the national capital of Tashkent in May and August 2009. Since then, Karimov has projected the threat from Islamism as an excuse for the restrictions.

However, more striking was President Karimov's crackdown on the 2005 civil unrest in which hundreds of people were killed by security forces. Hundreds of demonstrators were detained and tortured. A severe restriction on expression and manifestation of political dissent and the freedom of the press soon followed and became a de-facto policy.

Religious persecution predates even these two developments. In 1998, Karimov's government enacted a law making registration mandatory for all religious groups and providing for tedious criteria and procedures so that the government could use its own discretion to allow or refuse registration to organisations.

Titled, Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations, the legislation granted freedom of worship, freedom from religious persecution and the right to establish educational institution only to registered groups. It banned activities that were perceived to be conflicting with national security, such as proselytism, religious instruction in schools, private religious teaching, and publishing and distribution of religious literature without license.

The law developed strict and arduous criteria for registration and declared all non-state registered religious activities as a criminal offence. What's more, Section 2 of article 217 of the criminal code and article 201 of the administrative code imposed fines for repeat offenses under the religion law up to 300 times the minimum monthly wage of approximately \$25.

Indoctrinated with the anti-religious Soviet propaganda, President Karimov enacted the 1998 law to preserve the socio-political status quo of the country where freedom of religion was subject to tight regulation and control by the government to prevent them from effecting change in government or society. This is what sets Muslim-majority countries in Central Asia apart from their counterparts in the Middle East, where Islamic groups have played significant roles in shaping societies and government policy.

During the Soviet era, religion was merely stifled – and was not dead – in communist countries under the Soviet Union, and post-independence, religious communities were expected to emerge as a major force. And that compelled President Karimov to gain control and authority over all religious activities in the country.

Apart from restrictions, the government of Uzbekistan also runs media campaigns against the Christians. For example, state-owned television has shown films promoting hate against the religious minorities that seek to share their faith with others and as a result many converts face societal opposition. But generally speaking, persecution of Christians in Uzbekistan comes mostly from the State and not society.

Geopolitics, thanks to Uzbekistan's natural resources and its potential role in the global war against terror, has helped President Karimov to maintain and get away with his authoritarian rule. The European Union, one of the most influential among foreign powers in the region, imposed sanctions on Uzbekistan in November 2005 in response to the government's violent crackdown on the 2005 uprising and its refusal to accept an international investigation. However, the sanctions were eased soon thereafter despite the Uzbek government's refusal to budge. This was apparently due to Brussels' competition with Russia and China in gaining a larger share of Central Asia's energy resources.

Most recently, in February 2011, the European Council approved an amendment to the EU's Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Uzbekistan, extending customs and tariffs breaks to that country and opening up European markets to Uzbek cotton.

Uzbekistan uses its relations with the EU as a sign of reforms in the country. For example, at the country's periodic review by the UN Human Rights Committee in March 2010, the President Karimov's delegation claimed that the EU's lifting of the visa ban and the arms embargo signaled the bloc's satisfaction with Uzbekistan's own investigation into the 2005 unrest.

President Karimov has shrewdly sought to showcase reforms by enacting new legislations while at the same time subverting the spirit of reform measures by enacting conflicting laws. For example, while the constitution provides for freedom of religion and separation of religion and state, the 1998 law severely restricts religious freedom. Similarly, while Uzbekistan abolished the death penalty and ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2008, the incidence of disappearance and torture of political dissidents and violations of civil and political rights remains high.

At home, Karimov portrays diplomatic efforts by other countries towards ensuring respect for human rights and their accusations of violations as part of "an information war" by the "enemies" to legitimise "intervention" into the country's "internal affairs."

In the midst of President Karimov's constant reluctance to grant civil rights and promote party politics and his ability to minimise international pressure, the Christians as well as other

religious organizations, independent journalists, human rights activists and political activists continue to suffer.

That has to change. Uzbekistan has figured on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's list of Countries of Particular Concern, but Western nations have put little diplomatic pressure on Karimov's regime to promote respect for civil and political rights. Especially the European Union must put human rights before its strategic interests in Central Asia.

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Question Marks over Religious Freedom in Post-Election Malaysia

June 28, 2013

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's conservative *Barisan Nasional* coalition was declared the winner in the nation's 13th general election last month. But the victory margin was so thin, and allegations of election fraud so loud, that there is no sigh of relief yet for Najib, whose party used divisive issues during the campaigning period and is now likely to further deepen the country's religious and ethnic divide in an attempt to gain legitimacy.

Najib's coalition, whose campaign included banners against churches, managed to win – with 133 of the 222 parliamentary seats – but it was the worst-ever election performance of the party that has governed Malaysia since its independence from Britain in 1957.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, from a three-party alliance called *Pakatan Rakyat* that had pledged equality for minorities and an end to discrimination in the nation where Malay Muslims account for 60 percent of the 29 million people, won more votes overall – but trailed Najib's party in the number of parliamentary seats.

Najib's coalition had a poor showing even though it used pro-government mainstream news media to attack Anwar and promote itself. It is also widely believed that Najib's party was responsible for widespread election fraud.

After the election results were announced, Najib had to urge the people of his country to accept his victory, admitting that the nation had witnessed polarization. "One of the programmes we will undertake is national reconciliation... I think we realize that there are a lot of things we have to do as a party," he was quoted by the media as saying.

In his admission, Najib was mainly referring to the country's ethnic Chinese population that voted against his coalition due to the government's affirmative action policies for ethnic Malays, but the South-East Asian nation is also considerably divided along religious lines – and his party sought to further divide Muslims and Christians, who account for about 9 percent of the population.

Christians complained about billboards carrying pictures churches that were put up during the election campaign by Najib's coalition and which asked the people in the Malay language: "Do we want to see our children and grandchildren pray in this Allah's house? If we allow the use of the word Allah in churches, we sell our religion, race and nation....Vote Barisan Nasional because they can protect your religion, race and nation."

What's known as the "Allah issue" in Malaysia is extremely divisive, as it led to the torching of a church and several incidents of vandalism across the country in 2009 after the High Court

ruled that a Catholic weekly, *The Herald*, was allowed to use the word “Allah” to refer to God. The court said the Arabic word was not exclusive to Islam.

The court ruling overturned the interior ministry’s ban on the use of the word “Allah.” The ministry had imposed the ban a year earlier, claiming it could cause confusion among Muslims. It also threatened to revoke the license of *The Herald* if it continued to use “Allah” in its Malay language edition – although the first Malay Bible also used the word about four centuries ago. The ministry ordered that all Bibles be marked with a “For Christian use only” stamp.

The government was quick to appeal the High Court verdict, as was expected. However, while little happened in the case for the last more than three years, the matter was rushed to the court days after Najib’s election victory last month. On May 23, seven Islamic groups were allowed to become parties in the appeal. It is being suspected that the government could be working to bring the issue back in the public discourse.

Even ethnic minorities have not taken Najib’s promise of national reconciliation seriously given that he used the term “Chinese tsunami,” referring to the ethnic Chinese voters who voted for his opponent – he used the provocative term while promising reconciliation.

The nation’s economy has suffered under Najib’s governance and there is widespread resentment against him. It was perhaps this realization that led him to use divisive issues in the election.

Even Najib’s re-election with a razor-sharp margin is not being seen as legitimate given the allegations of election fraud. The governing coalition could, therefore, be expected to seek legitimacy by portraying itself as working to protect the interests of Malay Muslim and by further pitting them against ethnic Chinese and Christian minorities.

As it is, Malaysia has had not a good record in the area of religious freedom. The country’s constitution allows both federal and state governments to “control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.” It presumes all ethnic Malays as Muslim, and Muslims are generally not allowed to convert to another religion.

Malaysia’s national identity cards system is also discriminatory. The cards identify the religion of Muslims on its surface, while the affiliation of religious minorities is only encrypted in the card’s smart chip. Besides, many Christians have complained of being wrongly identified as Muslims in their identity cards.

Malaysia is described in the mainstream media as a moderate Muslim country, but recent developments can promote radicalization in the country. While this nation cooperates with Western nations, particularly the United States, in security issues, the curbs on civil rights and discrimination in government policies need to be addressed by the international community.

In its 2013 report on Malaysia, the Human Rights Watch noted that Washington has not strongly pressed the country over its failure to honor international human rights standards.

The U.S. has allowed concern for security cooperation to trump speaking out about human rights, it added.

This oversight must change, and rights issues addressed.

U.S. is Ignoring Vietnam's Continued Repression of Religious Freedom

March 16, 2013

South-East Asia is strategically important to the United States, given China's rapidly growing influence and strategic ambitions in the region. Washington's efforts to improve relations with its former foe, Vietnam, are understandable. But the U.S. must not turn a blind eye to the continued restrictions on religious and other freedoms to protect its strategic interests in the communist nation.

The United States has realized in recent years that China's strategic ambitions in Asia are not focused on the northeast, but on South-East Asia. Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hinted about a dramatic refocus of U.S. strategic attention in the region after a July 2010 ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi. President Obama followed it up by visiting the region.

The South China Sea dispute is a key consideration for the United States. The disputed "cow's tongue" area – spanning almost entire South China Sea – is immensely rich in natural resources, and hosts trade routes and military bases. China claims sovereignty across the region, pitting itself against six major Southeast Asian nations – particularly Vietnam and the Philippines – that also lay claims to parts of it. But Beijing has not allowed any international involvement to resolve the dispute.

It is believed that China's claims are a reaction to more U.S. forces in the Asia-Pacific, as China thinks it is being encircled by the U.S. The military budgets of key regional players have shot up, and Washington has ramped up security cooperation with Vietnam, and extended diplomatic carrots to that nation.

To justify its overtures, the United States is not only overlooking continued repression of civil rights and religious freedom, but also telling the world that the quality of democracy has improved in Vietnam.

Michael Michalak, then U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, praised the one-party communist state's commitment to religious freedom during his Human Rights Day speech in Hanoi in December 2010. "Over the last five years, the government has also improved the ability of religious people to practice their faith... individuals are now largely free to practice their deeply felt convictions. Pagodas, churches, temples and mosques throughout Vietnam are full. Improvements include increased religious participation, large-scale religious gatherings – some with more than 100,000 participants, growing numbers of registered and recognized religious organizations, increasing number of new churches and pagodas, and bigger involvement of religious groups in charitable activities," he said.

Months later, in 2011, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) called for re-designation of Vietnam as a “Country of Particular Concern (CPC),” but the State Department chose not to do so. From 2004 to 2006, Vietnam was designated as a CPC, but removed from the list in 2006 before then President George W. Bush visited the country for an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. Washington thus helped Vietnam join the World Trade Organization.

The United States is now admitting Vietnam to the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free trade agreement.

It’s not surprising that the Vietnam Human Rights Act of 2011 – which would limit non-humanitarian assistance to amounts provided in 2011 unless the federal government met two requirements – remains pending in the U.S. Senate. If approved by the Senate, the U.S. government would need to match or exceed any increase in non-humanitarian assistance with additional assistance to promote the rule of law, human rights, and certain exchange programs. It would also need to certify that the government of Vietnam has made progress towards promoting democracy and human rights.

Despite the many U.S. concessions, Vietnam continues to violate religious freedom of Protestants, Catholics and others.

The government no longer seeks to eradicate Christianity with its change of policy from confrontation to a management of religion approach through registration of churches and other religious groups, which was introduced by way of the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religion of 2004 and the Decree 22 of 2005. In 2005, an additional Prime Minister’s “Instruction on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism” was introduced allegedly to allow swift registration of local religious congregations, to facilitate the appeals of recognized Protestant denominations to build churches as well as to train and appoint pastors, and to help Protestants register their religious activities.

However, the rider that Protestant denominations must follow regulations and not be associated with separatist movements have been used by authorities for arbitrary actions. Perhaps, that was the intention.

An official of the Government Committee on Religious Affairs said last year the Prime Minister’s instruction had provided a “breakthrough” in the government’s management of religion by “limiting the unusually rapid development of the Protestant religion,” according to the Vietnamese version of an official news release on a high-level meeting about the effectiveness of directive issued on Feb. 28, 2012.

Also during this meeting, General Pham Dung of the Ministry of Public Security was appointed the new head of the Committee on Religious Affairs – which raised concerns among Christians. Visible in the move was the authoritarian government’s view of religious rights as a threat to its hold on power.

Consistent with this view, a court in the central province of Nghe An convicted 14 young political activists – most of them Catholics – in December 2012 for “plotting to overthrow” the government, sentencing them to prison terms between three and 13 years. “There is nothing to indicate the defendants intended to overthrow the government,” Phil Robertson,

deputy director for Asia at Human Rights Watch told the media. “This trial is in the middle of a deepening crackdown that’s been gradually picking up speed in the past year, year and a half. They’re mowing down the ranks of activists in Vietnam.”

In November, 2012, a court in the north-western province of Lai Chau convicted four Christians from the Hmong ethnic minority for “plotting to overthrow the government,” sentencing them to prison terms between three and seven years. They, along with other Hmong people, had attended a religious gathering the previous year, which authorities claimed was a separatist uprising.

Coming months and years could be worse for Christians. A new law, termed as “Decree 92,” effective Jan. 1, 2013, supersedes the decree of 2005.

“Under the norm, religious will be forced to undergo to an ‘educational program’ on the history of Vietnam and its legislation, sponsored and held by representatives of the ministries of Interior, Justice and Education,” Nguyen Hung of AsiaNews says. “Members of the clergy are required to prepare a specific request in the case of foreign travel for conferences and ask authorities’ ‘permission’ in the case of transfers to a different area of the country.”

Decree 92 goes on to state that a religious group must have operated for 20 years without any reported violation of the law before it can be given full legal recognition – when more than half of Vietnam’s Protestants, though existing for years, remain unregistered.

Vietnam is actively seeking to become more repressive. Vice Chairwoman of National Assembly of Vietnam, Ms Tòng Thị Phóng, recently said her government would increasingly seek to emulate China in matters of religious policies. She said this at a recent meeting between Chinese and Vietnamese government officials, according to AsiaNews.

But the United States can look at what the USCIRF said in its latest report on Vietnam.

“The government of Vietnam continues to control all religious communities, restrict and penalize independent religious practice severely, and repress individuals and groups viewed as challenging its authority,” the 2012 report states, noting “marked increases in arrests, detentions, and harassment of groups and individuals viewed as hostile to the Communist Party,” and an overall climate of religious repression in which “individuals continue to be imprisoned or detained for reasons related to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy; independent religious activity remains illegal.”

The USCIRF also observed that “the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship has grown quickly in recent years, but it has not led to needed improvements in religious freedom and related human rights in Vietnam.”

Most recently, this was also pointed out by U.S. Senator John McCain, who spent time in the notorious “Hanoi Hilton” prison, suffered injuries when his plane was shot down over North Vietnam during the war in 1967 and was tortured.

“When it comes to the values that Americans hold dear—freedom, human rights and the rule of law—our highest hopes for Vietnam still remain largely just hopes,” he wrote in an op-ed

published in *The Wall Street Journal* on March 13. “The government in Hanoi still imprisons and mistreats peaceful dissidents, journalists, bloggers, and ethnic and religious minorities for political reasons,” added McCain, a Republican who sits on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Vietnam has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and its policy on religion amounts to shameful flouting of its international obligations.

While the United States has said that Vietnam’s failure to improve its human rights record could affect its relations between the two governments, Washington is yet to act on those words.

Stakes are Global in Decline of Pluralism in Indonesia

June 14, 2017

The sentencing of Jakarta's former governor, Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian and ethnic Chinese, to two years in prison for alleged blasphemy is a cause for serious concern not only for religious minorities and tolerant Muslims in the archipelago, but also in the global fight against terrorism and Islamist radicalism. For, there is perhaps no better narrative to counter the growing Islamist extremism in the world than that of the moderate and tolerant practise of Islam in Indonesia.

The southeast Asian country is home to the world's largest Muslim population and has not allowed Saudi Arabia's intolerant Wahhabism to take root. It's not only tolerant and plural, but also a large functioning, stable democracy unlike any other country in the Muslim world. It's a country whose religious expressions are not a top-down phenomenon.

Under the authoritarian President Suharto's New Order regime from 1966 to 1998, Indonesia was equally moderate and tolerant but without religious freedom. Islamist groups were not allowed to function. While the process of Reformasi (reformation) that began after the fall of Suharto opened the gates for radicals to preach their versions of Islam and Islamist ideologies, the roughly 250 million people in the archipelago have largely shunned Wahhabism for about two decades.

However, Ahok's conviction and sentencing based on a video that showed him speaking out of context about a verse in the Quran, could be a turning point for the country. It represents the biggest breakthrough in the ongoing efforts of the Indonesian cleric Muhammad Rizieq Shihab, who mobilised massive protests against Ahok, to turn the country towards conservatism.

It's not surprising that Shihab, who leads the radical organization Islamic Defenders Front, locally known as FPI, is currently in Saudi Arabia. He fled Indonesia to avoid his arrest after a pornography-related case was filed against him. Ironically, his group has been opposing prostitution, gambling and bars to cleanse Indonesia of "sin."

The FPI, which targets liberal Muslims, Ahmadiyah and Shia mosques, churches and embassies of countries that it perceives to be hostile towards Islam, was founded in 1998. It has managed to gain about 200,000 members. The number is miniscule compared to the membership of moderate and pluralistic Muslim groups Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, which oppose attempts to spread Wahhabism in Indonesia and claim to have 50 million and 29 million followers respectively. However, the head count estimates or claims are neither a major concern nor any consolation.

Despite being seen as a negligible minority, Islamist groups have been able to flout local laws by physically attacking minorities and collecting protection money from the entertainment industry. More importantly, they have now been able to cause the defeat of a popular official,

Ahok, by making his religious and ethnic identity an issue in the recent gubernatorial election. Furthermore, they managed to get the court's endorsement of their narrative of blasphemy, which includes the assertion that non-Muslims should not be allowed to comment on the Quran's interpretation. In the verdict against Ahok, a judge quoted a verse from the Quran (Al-Maidah 51) which purports to suggest that Muslims should not elect non-Muslim leaders.

After their success in discounting the leadership of an otherwise efficient official by using the religion card, radical Islamists are now expected to target West Kalimantan governor Cornelis M.H., who is also a Christian. But they are not likely stop there. The radicals are also likely to try to influence the 2019 presidential election. They vehemently oppose President Joko Widodo, who is popularly known as Jokowi and is moderate and pluralistic. FPI leader Shihab has claimed that Jokowi is avenging the sentencing of Ahok through the pornography case.

The 2019 election is the main concern currently. For, the radicals are apparently eyeing nothing less than political power, though through parties that have been supporting them. And this could also have a bearing on how democratic Indonesia remains. For it's the authoritarian politicians and parties that need the support of groups like the FPI to compensate their lack of popularity and track record with the use of religion.

Hard-line groups like the FPI have put consecutive governments since 1998 in a conundrum. Governing parties and lawmakers have long debated whether such groups should be banned, but they have erred on the side of caution by allowing them to function due to fears that such an action could force radicals to become terrorists. Now, there is an added possibility of unrest and instability if these groups are proposed to be outlawed.

However, with the strength and networks of the NU and Muhammadiyah, it is not impossible to build consensus among the people for banning hard-line groups. As an alternative, the Jokowi government can also adopt a policy of zero tolerance towards radical group vis-a-vis law and order and also deal strictly with officials in the police and the military who help such groups.

The sooner it is done, the better it is for the future of Indonesia, and the world.

Indonesia's Flawed Approach to Check Islamist Extremism

When Indonesian President Joko Widodo took office one year ago this month, there were high hopes that his government would check Islamist extremist violence. However, President Jokowi, as he is affectionately known, is yet to prove that he has the ability to meet that expectation.

Jokowi does seem to have the will, as he recognizes that religious extremism is a serious issue, unlike his predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who neither acknowledged nor did anything to control the growth of extremist groups.

Jokowi's administration has been promoting the idea of a modern and moderate Islam to fight the rise of Islamist extremism. However, there appears to be a flaw in the president's methodology to deal with the threat. He seems to be working towards making the Indonesian society more tolerant, which, of course, is remarkable, but his efforts are not accompanied by strengthening of the rule of law.

Since the beginning of his presidency, Jokowi has been implementing a cautious bottom-up strategy, which is needed to promote tolerance and moderation, while avoiding a direct confrontation with extremist groups. This perhaps explains why he has not been taking enough top-down measures required to improve law and order. And extremist groups seem to have little fear of action by the government yet.

A month after Jokowi took office, extremist groups Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Forum of Indonesian Islamic community (Formasi) blocked services in four Protestant churches, and then moved on to threaten a Catholic church, St. Odilia in Cinunuk, in West Java province. There was an opportunity in these incidents for Jokowi to set the tone of his governance by taking strong action against these groups, but he didn't avail it.

The GKI Yasmin church in Bogor on the suburbs of Jakarta also continues to hold worship services outside the presidential palace as their building remains sealed despite a directive of the Supreme Court for the local authority to allow the church use the premises. The city mayor says he will still not de-seal the church.

Jokowi has the power to enforce the highest court's order, but he has taken no action against the Bogor mayor, who is under pressure from extremist groups. The GKI Yasmin congregation will hold its 100th service outside the palace, which is Jokowi's office, next month to carry on with their peaceful and prayerful protest.

Recently, Jokowi presided over the congresses of Indonesia's two largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, both of which promote tolerant versions of Islam. Instead of pledging strong action against those who propagate extremist

ideologies and indulge in violence, he called on the NU to increase its role as a representative of moderate and peaceful Islam and to address the issue of extremism.

As Human Rights Watch noted, Jokowi sought to “outsource a solution to Indonesia’s religious intolerance problem to NU and Muhammadiyah.”

Despite being influential and popular, the two organizations cannot be expected to handle the growth of extremism, which has many facets – some of which can be dealt with only with the power of the state.

A recent editorial in The Jakarta Post stated this: “Indonesians need both organizations, widely considered the global face of Indonesia’s ‘moderate Islam,’ to contribute much more and help protect them from today’s strong appeal to violent jihad in the name of God. These ‘moderates’ tend to downplay the growth of homegrown terrorism, insisting they are minority. However, a few hundred recruits of the Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL), found to be from Indonesia, are too many from a ‘moderate’ Muslim nation.”

Jokowi also attended a national congress of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the country’s top Muslim clerical body which issued a fatwa saying the Ahmadiyya sect wasn’t part of the Islamic faith and that its followers were infidels. The fatwa has led to numerous attacks and brutal, public murders of people from the Ahmadiyya community.

In a recent meeting of Indonesian Muslims in Yogyakarta, the MUI did not invite representatives of Ahmadiyya and Shia organizations, but sent invitations to extremist groups like the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), which is known for its jihadist ideology, and the FPI, which is known for targeting Christians, as reported by local newspapers.

Jokowi’s political compulsions are understandable. The parliament is dominated by opposition parties, some of which are Islamist and can make it difficult for the president to function. However, just as Jokowi has managed to win their support for passing important bills, it is not impossible for him to make his way to adopt a strict policy in the area of law and order. After all, every incident of blocking of worship services, violent attacks and closure of churches is a blatant violation of law.

Bringing change in religious attitudes is a long-term goal, as it takes time for attitudes to change. In the meantime, as a short-term goal, Jokowi also needs to restore the confidence of minorities, including Christians, Ahmadiyyas, Shias and others. It would need both bottom-up and top down approach to deal with the menace.

US Must not Ignore Islamist Extremism in Indonesia

August 23, 2012

Since the 2002 Bali bombings, the United States has focused on, and considerably succeeded in, enabling Indonesia to weaken the South-East Asia's largest terror group, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). However, the threat still prevails, as extremism, which is fueling terrorism, is growing unabated.

Indonesia is a key player in the U.S. war on terror in South-East Asia, which is also soon likely to be the focus of U.S. foreign policy due to the massive economic growth in the region, China's increasing military presence and the threat of a nuclear-armed North Korea. More importantly, the archipelago is located astride the Strait of Malacca, the world's most important strategic sea lanes linking Asia with the Middle East and Europe and carrying roughly 40 percent of the global trade. And the JI had training camps and bases in Aceh, which is close to the Strait.

Indonesia also has the world's largest Muslim population, and is seen as a model of Islam's compatibility with democracy. While the majority of the country's 210 million Muslims are Sunni from the moderate Shafi'i school of the Islamic jurisdiction, conservative Salafi approaches to Islam took root in the country through the Darul Islam (DI), which was formed in 1942 during the War of Independence from the Dutch Empire, and was later regrouped as the Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia or DDII in 1967.

Former dictatorial President Suharto kept Islamist groups under tight control while in office from 1967 to 1998. But after his fall, several offshoots of the DDII emerged, including the JI.

It is believed that the JI, which would focus mostly on Christian-Muslim conflicts in Indonesia, forged links with al Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks. Terror strikes followed in the country, including the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2003 JW Marriott hotel explosions, the 2004 Australian embassy attack, the 2005 Bali bombings, the 2009 JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotel bombings, and a failed plot to assassinate President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2010.

Washington takes the terror threat seriously, but not the growth of extremism.

The United States, along with Australia, funds the Indonesian counter-terrorism squad Detachment 88, which has captured or killed most leaders of the JI. While no major terror attack has been reported in recent months, the lull might just be temporal, experts have warned.

"In the face of strong police pressure, they [jihadists] are finding ways to regroup on the run, in prison and through internet forums, military training camps and arranged marriages," said a report by the International Crisis Group (ICG), entitled, "How Indonesian Extremists Regroup," and released on July 16.

The report didn't come as a surprise. "The problem of terrorism is motivated by radical ideology, so the movement doesn't automatically end with the capture and death of key figures," Indonesian National Anti-Terror Agency chief Ansyaad Mbai had told AFP in September 2011. The JI, he said, had "metamorphosized" into multiple new threats.

Many of the jihadist groups that exist today are linked to the Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT), a group formed by JI's spiritual leader Abu Bakar Ba'asyir in 2008, the ICG report noted. It also indicated that unchecked extremism is helping terrorists. "Some pro-Sharia (Islamic law) advocacy groups that do not use violence themselves but whose teachings are in line with jihadi views play a similar role," it stated.

Kiky Hutami, a researcher at the Jakarta-based Setara Institute for Peace and Democracy, agrees that the growth of extremism can be linked to terrorism. "Radicalism is the starting point of terrorism, and terrorism is the peak of radicalism," she said.

The Setara Institute recorded 129 religious attacks, mostly against the Christian and Ahmadiyya minorities and by the "non-terrorist" radical group Islamic Defenders Front (locally known as the FPI), from January to June this year. In 2011, it counted 244 attacks. Some of these attacks were exceptionally brutal and launched in the presence of police. For example, a video went viral on YouTube last February showing hundreds of extremists in West Java shouting Allahu Akbar (Allah is the Greatest) and smashing the heads of three Ahmadiyya "infidels" even as policemen looked on.

Hutami was part of a field study that showed that "non-terrorist" radical groups in Central Java were being used by terrorists for recruitment. The Setara study followed a suicide bomb attack on the Sepenuh Injil Bethel Church in Solo City in Central Java on Sept. 25, 2011.

Though small in numbers, the radical groups are highly influential. In May, authorities canceled a sold-out Lady Gaga show after hardliners threatened to attack the venue.

Hardliners are opposed to the spirit of the Indonesian Constitution, which is based on the doctrine of Pancasila or five principles: the nation's belief in the one and only God, just and civilized humanity, the nation's unity, democracy, and social justice. They are fighting for Sharia law and "Islamization" of the country's society.

And they have managed to influence a large section of the Indonesian society. More than half of the respondents in a June 2011 survey by the Setara Institute justified the use of violence against "heretical" sects and "immoral" people. Over 35 percent said they wanted the Sharia law in the country. Further, over 37 percent wanted a law allowing stoning as a punishment for certain crimes, and close to 35 percent were in favor of the system of Caliphate.

President Yudhoyono, in office since 2004, has been over-cautious in dealing with extremists, fearing he might be seen as "un-Islamic" in a Muslim-majority country. It is estimated that around 10 percent of the voters in Indonesia support conservative parties.

Islamist parties, which seek extremist groups' support during elections, are often wooed by secular parties. Yudhoyono's allies include Islamist parties, such as the National Mandate Party, the National Awakening Party and the Prosperous Justice Party.

Yudhoyono's presidential term will end in 2014, and he does not qualify to seek another term. However, none of the three likely presidential candidates can be expected to curb extremism either.

Entrepreneur Aburizal Bakrie is the head of the Golkar party, which is fighting for regional Islamic regulations, and is infamous as one of the country's most corrupt politicians.

Prabowo Subianto is leader of the main opposition party Gerindra. Former son-in-law of the dictator Suharto, he is an alleged mastermind of the violence targeting ethnic Chinese Indonesians in the run up to the East Timor's break from Indonesia in 1999.

Sri Mulyani Indrawati, an independent, is a Managing Director of the World Bank Group and former finance minister, and known for exposing corrupt practices of Bakrie's family businesses. But she may lack the political acumen required to contest elections or deal with politically savvy extremists.

Therefore, on its own, Jakarta may not check extremism, at least in the near future. And President Barack Obama, who spent part of his childhood in Indonesia, perhaps sees the archipelago as an international public relations opportunity to portray himself to the Muslim world as a good guy who respects Islam. After all, he visited Indonesia in November 2010, less than one and a half years after his June 2009 Cairo speech.

Washington's policy towards Jakarta has largely been carrot-driven partly because the United States is competing with China, the biggest investor in Indonesia, and cannot afford to upset Jakarta too much. Extremism, after all, is closely tied to domestic politics, and Yudhoyono fears that a crackdown on radical groups will hurt him politically. This is possibly one of the reasons why Washington has chosen to overlook the growth of extremism in that nation.

However, if both Jakarta and Washington continue to close their eyes to the gathering storm, it might soon be too late to prevent Indonesia from becoming another Pakistan, and yet another headache for the United States and the world.

Violence Feared in Indonesia; Let's Prevent It

*(Please find below a letter of concern you could send to officials)

July 28, 2011

A protestant church in Indonesia may face mass violence if ongoing tensions are not calmed, WEA-RLC has learnt. The Yasmin Church in Bogor city, which was sealed off by authorities, has been holding Sunday worship on a sidewalk for the last few months. And each time the open-air worship is held, church members are outnumbered by a crowd that gathers around to protest.

One a Sunday this month, “only 35 worshippers celebrated Holy Communion on a sidewalk in front of their sealed-off church...while surrounded by seven times as many security officers and hardliners opposed to the church,” according to Indonesia’s national newspaper *The Jakarta Post*. As the worship was in progress, “a crowd of around 50 milled about at a distance,” singing the national anthem, *Padamu Negeri* [For you my country], and chanting, “God is great,” in an attempt to disrupt the church service.

Part of the Indonesian Christian Church or GKI, the Yasmin Church is situated in Bogor city on the suburbs of Jakarta, one of the most communally tense areas of Indonesia. The daily noted that it had been a “weekly battle against the persecution of religious minorities wreaked by [Bogor] Mayor Diani Budiarto, who, in clear violation of a Supreme Court ruling, sealed off the church.”

Last December, the Supreme Court overturned local administration’s plea to uphold a lower court’s decision to shut down the church. The authorities then provided a public hall to the church for holding worship service temporarily. However, a month later, the mayor came under pressure from Islamist extremists and refused to allow the church to reopen. The mayor has also overlooked a recommendation made by the Ombudsman this month saying the administration is at fault for annulling the construction permit given to the church and therefore it should not be restrained from holding worship service.

Numerous supporters of extremists in Bogor constitute the vote bank of the administration. A recent survey by a civil rights group, the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, showed that around 45 percent of residents of Bogor had objections to building of a non-Muslim place of worship.

Some believe powerful local residents have a commercial plan at the location of the church and hence the opposition. Whatever the motivation, the church this month sent an “SOS” appeal to a Catholic news agency, Fides, saying their members were at risk of facing “mass persecution.” The church also said that at a City Council meeting on July 15, some elements threatened to organize masses to put an end to the open-air worship.

The international community must take the threat seriously, as violence by extremist Islamist groups over permission to build a church or hold Christian worship is a trend this country has witnessed in recent years.

Local Christians complain that a 2006 decree, known as the Revised Joint Ministerial Decree on the Construction of Houses of Worship, has resulted in numerous instances of forced closure of churches and revocation and delays in issuing building permits.

Promulgated following anti-minority edicts issued by the Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI), the decree targets Christians and “heretic” Ahmadiyyas. It mandates religious groups to obtain the signatures of at least 90 members and 60 persons of other religious groups in the community as well as approval from the local religious affairs office. Even when these requirements are met, authorities seek to obstruct church worship. And such obstructions typically lead to violent attacks.

It is believed that the majority of the attacks are carried out or overseen by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the biggest Islamic radical mass organization having branches in 28 provinces and support-base of four million people.

To promote hate against Christians, groups like the FPI include in their teachings the allegation that most Christians have bad intentions towards Muslims, a recent study by the Setara Institute found. They particularly refer to and constantly repeat verse 120 of Al Baqoroh (Sura): “And never the Jews and Christians will be pleased with you unless you follow their Din (creed). Say then! ‘The guidance of Allah is the only guidance’, (O listener who he may be) if you become follower of their desires, after the knowledge that has come to you, then no one will be your protector from Allah and no helper..” This is the most popular and constantly repeated verse among the radicals.

Extremist groups, which were suppressed by the second president of Indonesia Suharto, emerged after the fall of his regime in 1998, as democracy which followed gave them hope for a voice and role in public affairs. They oppose the doctrine of *Pancasila* – five principles held to be inseparable and interrelated – on which the Indonesian Constitution is based. These principles include the nation’s belief in the one and only God and social justice, humanity, unity and democracy for all.

With the growth of these groups, attacks on Ahmadiyyas and Christians also increased, especially in recent years. The Setara Institute recorded 135 incidents of violation of the freedom of religion or belief, including attacks, in 2007. There were 265 incidents in 2008 and 200 in 2009. However, most common Indonesian Muslims are seen as progressive and tolerant.

The biggest stumbling block in protecting minorities is the culture of impunity, which prevails partly because officials play a role in violence, and partly because of a lack of will on the part of the government to take on extremist elements. The government, however, urgently needs to enforce law in each and every instance of violence in the name of religion. Experience shows that leniency with extremists only emboldens them rather than evading unrest.

Regrettably, the government does not seem determined to protect the Christians of Bogor. And officials may not act until the world takes notice of and expresses concern about it. Therefore, WEA-RLC urges all concerned Christian groups, individuals and civil rights organisations to write letters of concern to the mayor and other officials to stop the apprehended persecution of members of the GKI church.

A sample letter and the contact details of the mayor, the human rights commission, the home/interior minister, and national media are given below:

*Sample Letter:

Mr. Diani Budiarto

The Mayor of Bogor

City Hall Bogor

Jl. Ir. H. Juanda No. 10 Bogor

West Java – Indonesia

Dear Mr. Budiarto,

Out of my concern for the safety of the Christian minority in your jurisdiction, I am writing to urge your office to de-seal the Taman Yasmin Indonesian Christian Church (GKI).

I have learnt that church members are holding worship service on a sidewalk on Sundays as their church remains sealed even after a Supreme Court ruling overturned your administration's plea to uphold a lower court's decision to shut down the church. An Ombudsman has also recommended that the church be re-opened.

As you must be aware, the open-air worship is being held amid protests by some local residents and extremist elements, and the situation can turn violent any time.

The international community has a high regard for the doctrine of *Pancasila* embedded in the constitution of your country, and as part of that community I truly hope and urge that your office will uphold its spirit and de-seal the church at the earliest.

Yours sincerely,

(Your/Organisation's Name)

(Designation, Contact Details)

p.s.: Carbon copy sent to media, home minister and national commission on human rights.

If you are sending an email:

Subject: Urgent Concern for Safety of Christians

"To": kominfo@kotabogor.go.id, inspektorat@kotabogor.go.id;

Cc: info@komnasham.go.id, pusdatinkomtel@depdagri.go.id,

editorial@thejakartapost.com, letters@thejakartaglobe.com

Contact Details:

Mr. Diani Budiarto

The Mayor of Bogor

City Hall Bogor

Jl. Ir. H. Juanda No. 10 Bogor

West Java - Indonesia

Tel: +62-251-8321075

kominfo@kotabogor.go.id; inspektorat@kotabogor.go.id

National Commission on Human Rights, Indonesia

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Mr. Gamawan Fauzi

Minister of Home Affairs
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Why Religious Violence has Grown in Indonesia

February 18, 2011

Attacks on Christians and other minorities in this Muslim-majority archipelago are being routinely reported in national and international media. Liberal Muslims of Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, are calling it the worst manifestation of religious extremism in decades.

Most recently, a crowd of Islamist extremists vandalized three churches in Central Java province on February 8. Two days earlier, three people from the Ahmadiyya minority community – considered a cult by Sunni clergy – were brutally battered to death by another mob in West Java province.

While “heretic” Islamic sects bear the brunt of Islamist extremism in many Muslim-majority countries, in Indonesia Christians are the main target. A civil society group, the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, recorded at least 75 incidents involving violations of religious freedom against the Christian community, and 50 against the Ahmadiyya sect in 2010.

More than the statistics, what worries the Setara Institute is that the extremist groups, otherwise seen as “fringe elements” having little influence apart from their involvement in street politics, have widened their support base and infiltrated a top Muslim body and political parties.

Support Base

In a report released two months ago, the Setara Institute warned that the Islamic People's Forum, an extremist group locally known as the FUI, “attempted to widen its support significantly by holding a meeting of 200 influential clerics from across the archipelago” in 2008. One of those clerics, identified as Salim bin Umar Al Attas, is known to have over 10,000 followers. It added that the FUI was also running a radio show on a station owned by a group of clerics in Bogor.

The report said some leaders of extremist groups, including FUI head Muhammad Al Khaththath, had infiltrated a key body of Islamic jurisprudence, the Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI), which often issues edicts “forbidding religious pluralism, liberalism and secularism.” Al Khaththath, who became a Board member in 2005, was among those who “actively lobbied the MUI to issue an edict forbidding the practice of liberal Islam.”

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has unofficially endorsed the MUI's religious authority, saying his administration will “embrace the views, recommendations and edicts of the MUI.”

While the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), another extremist group, and a few other outfits lead attacks on minorities and their institutions, the FUI concentrates mainly on lobbying and broadening the network among radical groups as well as the support base.

The 2006 Revised Joint Ministerial Decree on the Construction of Houses of Worship was promulgated after anti-minority edicts were issued by the MUI.

The decree, apparently targeting Christian churches, mandates religious groups to obtain the signatures of at least 90 members and 60 persons of other religious groups in the community, and approval from the local religious affairs office before they are granted permission to build a house of worship.

The decree has resulted in numerous instances of forced closure of churches, revocation and delays in issuing building permits, and also violent attacks.

State Connivance, Inaction

The Setara Institute noted that the police were either directly responsible for or condoned at least 56 incidents of violations of religious freedom in 2010. Even district heads were responsible for 19 violations and sub-district chiefs for 17.

YouTube carries many videos showing mobs of extremists launching attacks on minorities while police are doing little more than looking on.

Policing is a prerogative of provincial authorities, but the Central Government cannot plead helplessness.

The report showed that the Central Government only reacted to situations that had already gotten out of hand – smaller incidents were left for regional authorities, which do not have the capacity to solve such problems, to deal with. Besides, 40 percent of the cases were related to conflicts that had been going on for years.

Local Christians complain that churches are attacked almost every week but such incidents are not being highlighted by the “sensitive” media.

State’s Preoccupation

The fact that the Indonesian government is flaunting the prospects of 7 percent economic growth this year while reeling under the worst-ever spell of religious intolerance, speaks volume about its priorities. More than the government’s belief that economic advancement is sufficient to deal with religious extremism, it appears that President Yudhoyono does not want to take a political risk by dealing with rioters strictly.

The growing religious extremism can be termed as a constitutional crisis given the doctrine of *Pancasila* – five principles held to be inseparable and interrelated – on which the Constitution is based. While the first principle speak of the nation’s belief in the one and only God, the other four deal with social justice, humanity, unity and democracy for all. Moreover, the official national motto of Indonesians *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity).

The increasing clout of the extremist groups – as evident in the passing of joint-parliamentary decrees (of which the 2006 decree on places of worship is one), issuing of anti-minority edicts by the MUI, the culture of impunity in cases of violent attacks, extremist groups receiving support from popular clerics, and so on – coupled with State complicity and lack of action, is worrying not only the minorities but also a majority of citizens who are Muslim. But the government is in a denial mode. Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali recently told the media that “there were no religious conflicts during 2010.”

The country has witnessed the kind of religious mob violence commonly associated with Pakistan or Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan, noted an article in *Asia Sentinel*. “In addition, corrupt and politically motivated courts, seldom a venue for justice, have been wreaking their own kind of mayhem on behalf of the fundamentalist minority.”

The President needs to realize that his non-confrontational approach towards the extremists is only disrupting peace instead of establishing it. The government, if it has the will, can curb the alarming growth of extremism so that Indonesia stays on the path to democracy and pluralism.

The Central Government must ensure that authorities strictly implement existing laws concerning powers and responsibilities of local authorities in taking preventive measures when any disturbance of public order is apprehended as well as those dealing with incitement to violence or hate speeches.

Meanwhile, the legislature or a competent court should bring in more clarity on what constitutes crime under the 2006 decree and possibly amend it to address grievances of religious minorities.

The debate on which Indonesia will prevail – modern, business-oriented economy or an intolerant, quasi-Islamic state that enforces its will through mob rule and terror – among Indonesian citizens reveals that the President is losing people’s confidence. At least that should worry him.

Obama, Kerry Must Dissuade Laos from Curbing Religious Freedom

January 19, 2016

While U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is scheduled to meet Lao Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong on Jan. 25, Barack Obama will become the first U.S. president to visit this Southeast Asian country later this year. Their visits are to back Laos as the 2016 chair for the Association for South East Asian Nations, or ASEAN. As the United States makes this strategic move, it must urge Vientiane to improve its religious freedom record, which remains worrisome since 2009, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF.

The United States' relations with Laos have improved during Obama's presidency but with little or no change in Vientiane's policies towards minority religions, as USCIRF continues to place Laos on the list of Tier 2 countries, in which religious freedom conditions require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by governments.

The Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWFLRF) has reported numerous incidents of persecution over the last few years.

A pastor, identified as Singkeaw Wongkongpheng, from Na-ang village in Luang Prabang Province's Chomphet District in northern Laos was stabbed to death on Sept. 8, 2015 after he disregarded officials' orders to stop preaching Christ.

On Sept. 17, a 61-year-old Christian believer, Tiang Kwentianthong, from Huey village in Atsaphangthong district of Savannakhet province died of diabetes-related complications in prison while serving a term of nine months. Prison authorities allegedly denied him treatment. He was charged under medical laws for praying for the sick.

Ethnic minority Protestant groups often face expulsion from village, forced relocation, pressure to renounce faith, detention and arrest, destruction of livestock and crop and closure of churches, especially in the provinces of Savannakhet, Bolikhamxai, Houaphan, Salavan, Luanprabang, Attapeu, Oudamsai and Luang Namtha.

It was hoped that Laos would gradually begin to allow religious freedom after the United States gave it a (non-permanent) normal trade status in 2004, two years after Vientiane passed the Prime Minister's 2002 Decree on Religious Practice – known as Decree 92.

The decree was meant to showcase religious freedom in the country by legalizing religious activities - including propagation, printing of religious material, ownership and construction of places of worship, and forming an association with religious groups from other countries -

which were previously deemed as illegal. But it also allowed the government to control, and interfere in, all religious activities, and required all religious organizations to register with the government. Besides, it banned any religious activity that could potentially create “social division” or “chaos” – vague terms whose definitions were left to the discretion of the authorities.

Around 60 percent of the roughly 7 million people in Laos are Theravada Buddhist who enjoy a special status in the Lao society. The communist government even promotes Buddhism, while suppressing minority religions. The government has co-opted the majority religion by controlling the organization of monks, seeking their support for its discriminatory and authoritarian policies.

The government recognizes the Catholic Church, the Laos Evangelical Church and the Seventh Day Adventists, and pressures other small independent Protestant congregations to come under one of these recognized groups.

The Hmong Christian community, which allied with the United States in the Vietnam War and later during the civil war in Laos, faces the brunt of Christian persecution. All Protestant Christians, especially those from the Hmong community, are seen as American or imperialist “imports” into the country and a threat to the communist rule.

Laos remains a single-party state ruled by the Marxist-Leninist Laos People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) since the end of the Laotian civil war in 1975. Persecution of Christians, and other minorities, is part of the government’s attempt to maintain its power.

Laos is a landlocked country, which shares borders with five stronger nations: Vietnam, China, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia, making Vientiane nervous and extra-cautious about any attempt by the people to form assemblies for any purpose without government regulation.

An example of this can be seen in the disappearance of Sombath Somphone, an internationally acclaimed community development worker, on Dec. 15, 2012, when he was last seen in Vientiane being stopped by police and then taken away in a pickup truck. He remains missing.

Laos is close to Vietnam, also a communist nation, not only geographically, but also ideologically. The two nations signed an agreement to “cooperate” on religious issues in 2002, and renewed it in 2014 for continued cooperation until 2020.

As USCIRF has recommended, Washington needs to integrate concerns about religious freedom into its bilateral agenda when engaging with central government and provincial Lao authorities. The Commission has made other additional recommendations, which include initiating a formal human rights mechanism to address regularly and consistently with the Lao government issues such as ethnic and religious discrimination, torture and other forms of ill-treatment in prisons, unlawful arrests and detentions, and the lack of due process and an independent judiciary.

“Continue to engage the Lao government on specific cases of religious freedom violations, including but not limited to forced evictions and/or forced renunciations relating to the

practice of one's faith, and emphasizing the importance of consistent implementation, enforcement, and interpretation of the rule of law by both central government and local officials," adds USCIRF, an independent, bipartisan, U.S. federal government commission, in its 2015 report.

It is hoped that Kerry and Obama would begin implementing the recommendations as they visit Laos and meet high officials.

Why Laos Restricts Religious Freedom

April 25, 2011

Troops of the Lao People's Army (LPA) caught a group of Hmong Christians, confiscated their Bible and shot to death four women – after repeatedly raping two of them – forcing their husbands and children to witness the disgraceful and gruesome act on April 15.

US-based think-tank Center for Public Policy Analysis reported that soldiers from a special 150-member unit of the LPA, led by Vietnamese secret police and military advisers, were responsible for the incident in north-eastern Xiengkhouang Province.

Another US-based group, Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom, reported that district police in Khammouan Province unlawfully detained 11 church leaders and believers around last Christmas, and officials of Katin village in Salavan Province expelled seven Christian families early this year.

Contrary to the notion that Laos, a communist state, has improved its religious freedom record over the last few years, especially after the United States gave it the (non-permanent) normal trade status in 2004, appears to be false. News from Laos does not reach the outside world, in time or ever, thanks to the absence of free press and lack of information infrastructure in the country.

Persecution of Christians, mostly from ethnic minority Protestant groups, which includes expulsion from village, forced relocation, pressure to renounce faith, detention and arrest, destruction of livestock and crop and closure of churches, is routine in provincial areas, especially in the provinces of Bolikhamxai, Houaphan, Salavan, Luanprabang, Attapeu, Oudamsai and Luang Namtha.

The Hmong Christian community in Laos (the Hmong, ethnic minority, allied with the United States in the Vietnam War and later during the civil war in Laos) is persecuted not only by the governments of Laos and Vietnam, but also by Hmong insurgents who have existed since the end of the Vietnam War. The insurgents seek to recruit Hmong Christians – a move opposed by most Christian leaders – and, at times, they attack those who resist or oppose them. And in their operations against the rebel group, Lao security forces indiscriminately target Hmong villages often destroying churches and homes out of suspicion.

Protestant Christianity in general, and the Hmong Christian community in particular, is seen by sections of the Lao society and the authorities as an American or imperialist “import” into the country and a threat to the communist rule.

While Laos has undergone some economic and cultural reforms, the country remains a single party state ruled by the Marxist-Leninist Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) since the end of the Laotian civil war in 1975. The primary focus of “the party” has been to retain political power – one of the main reasons behind civil restrictions.

Part of the problem is that Laos is a narrow, landlocked country sharing borders with five, mostly stronger, nations: Vietnam, China, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. Many of the

provinces border two countries – Thailand and Vietnam – and most of Laos' frontier areas are impoverished, lacking basic infrastructure. So the Laotian regime maintains a tight control over the social life.

In addition, the country's proximity – both geographic and ideological – to Vietnam in particular is not helpful vis-à-vis religious freedom. Vietnam, too, is a single-party communist state. Moreover, Laos had a restive history with the United States, from the Vietnam War to the Civil War in Laos in the 1970s. Laos has diplomatic relations with Washington, but it remains cautious.

The party has been reluctant to grant those civil rights – or to the degree – that may threaten its exclusive political hold over the country. Rights of the people end – on paper or on the ground – precisely where such a threat is perceived.

The LPRP has allowed neither political opposition nor free press, nor civil society – or any other democratic institution that can challenge the power of or oppose the one-party regime – to take birth in the country. The people elect members of the National Assembly, the unicameral parliament, but it is known to be a rubber stamp of party's decisions.

Religious organisations and institutions have been allowed to function, but only as long as they remain under government surveillance and control.

The Prime Minister's 2002 Decree on Religious Practice – known as Decree 92 – passed to showcase religious freedom in the country gave some freedoms but also allowed government control of and interference in all religious activities and required all religious organisations to register with the government. The Decree did legalise religious activities previously deemed as illegal – including propagation, printing of religious material, ownership and construction of places of worship, and forming an association with religious groups from other countries – but subject to state approval. In addition, it banned any religious activity that could potentially create “social division” or “chaos” – leaving their definitions to the discretion of the authorities.

Around 60 percent of the 6.8 million people in Laos are followers of Theravada Buddhism, which enjoys a special status in the Lao society and is officially promoted by the “communist” government. The party apparently seeks to achieve political goals and suppress smaller religious denominations by co-opting the majority religion. It exempts Buddhism from most of the restrictions imposed on other religions, but maintains its control over the Buddhist clergy.

Among the Christian groups operating in the country, the government recognises only the Catholic Church, the Laos Evangelical Church and the Seventh Day Adventists. It pressures other small independent Protestant congregations to come under one of the recognised groups – so that it can exercise control over them with greater ease and more efficiently – and refuses to recognise them independently. While the Decree does not mention how unrecognised groups should be dealt with, experience shows that their activities are seen by authorities as illegal and their members and leaders are detained and arrested under various pretexts.

Human rights group Amnesty International estimated that at least 90 ethnic minority Protestants were arrested and detained without charge or trial between July and September 2009 alone. Officials who abuse their powers are hardly punished.

It is the mandate of the Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO) to scrutinise implementation of laws by the authorities and prosecute in case of a contravention. However, practically, this is not possible given the party's almost complete hold over it. Besides, breach of law by officials takes place mainly in rural areas where the people are mostly poor and illiterate. Even otherwise, it is common knowledge in the country that the basis of "justice" is not the letter or spirit of law but political/social influence or bribe – a luxury which few Christians have.

Even the judiciary is not independent. The judges are appointed by the National Assembly, all the members of which are from the one and only party in the country.

However, given that Laos realises the need for economic growth – especially when it compares itself with Vietnam – and is open to foreign investment and engagement with countries outside the region, there is scope for advocacy and engagement with this nation. As a June 2010 briefing by UK-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide recommended, Laos should be encouraged to remove the reservation to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which goes against the spirit of the covenant's aim to protect individual rights, allows for arbitrary interpretation and contains vague wording.

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jehangir, who visited Laos in 2009, recommended a review of the Decree No. 92, saying bureaucratic controls over and impediments to liberty of movement in the context of religious activities should be discontinued. She also suggested that explanatory policy directions be passed on to the provincial and district levels to avoid any discriminatory interpretation. In addition, she noted that members of religious minorities seemed to have little or no access to higher education, and therefore the existing affirmative action schemes must be extended to religious minorities. Further, she called for adequate training of the personnel of detention facilities to raise awareness of their duty to promote and respect international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief.

Laos should be urged to heed Jehangir's recommendations.

Laos also needs to introduce administrative reforms providing for accountability of officials to an independent institution.

The rulers in Laos often claim legitimacy of the single-party regime by saying there is no other way to hold a multi-ethnic and impoverished nation together. It is not unusual for a small, landlocked nation to seek greater control – social, cultural and political – but such a regime cannot hope to earn sympathies and respect of the international community as long as it persecutes and restricts basic human rights of its own people, including religious minorities.

Future of Burma's Christians is Tied to Peace Process

February 29, 2016

Burma, a nation that was under military rule for decades, will now be led by democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy party swept the election last year, ending the domination of the military-backed Union Solidarity Development Party. But this alone may not bring any significant improvement in the lives of Christians, the majority of who live in conflict zones.

The 2008 constitution of Burma, officially known as Myanmar, bars Suu Kyi from presidency because her late husband was British and her two sons are foreign nationals. This is not the main concern, though, as she is likely to appoint a proxy president and officially assume the role of a minister. The real issue, instead, is that despite being at the helm of the new government, Suu Kyi will have little control over the peace process.

The constitution gives the military, which is not accountable to the civilian government, exclusive authority over the ministries of defense, home affairs (interior) and border affairs - the ministries which have been involved in the ongoing - seemingly make-believe - efforts towards resolving the conflicts.

The constitution also states that the military shall appoint 25 percent of the members of the legislative bodies, including the national parliament, ruling out any constitutional amendment - which requires 'yes' votes by at least 75 percent of the national legislators.

While Burma's politics has been dominated by the ethnic Burman majority, most of the country's estimated 4 million Christians are from ethnic minorities who live in states along the country's borders with China, Thailand and India. For example, the ethnic Chin people from Chin state and ethnic Kachin people from Kachin state are predominantly Christian. A significant number of the ethnic Karen people are also Christian.

The border states have been the scene of the world's longest running civil wars. Ethnic minority groups have been fighting for greater autonomy in their respective states and resisting the military's efforts to assimilate them into the majority Burman culture ever since Burma achieved independence from British rule in 1948.

Sections of the ethnic minorities have formed their own armies to resist attacks by military personnel - which are often carried out without any provocation. Military's attacks include landmine explosions, rape of women, indiscriminate killing of people and forced displacement.

The Christians who live elsewhere in the country, such as in Yangon and Mandalay, will also continue to face threats, mostly by the Patriotic Association of Myanmar, abbreviated in the local language as "Ma Ba Tha," which is led by Ashin Wirathu Thera, a monk who once described

himself as the “bin Laden” of Buddhism. The group comprises influential Buddhist monks and nuns.

The Ma Ba Tha lobbied the former quasi-civilian USDP government for passage of laws that restrict religious conversions and interfaith marriage.

The interfaith marriage legislation restricts a Buddhist woman from marrying a partner outside of her religion, unless the man converts to Buddhism.

The conversion law allows the state to decide who may convert to another religion and who may not. The law calls for the formation of “registration boards” in townships with the jurisdiction to examine and “approve” religious conversions. Those seeking to convert are required to submit an application with their personal details as well as to state the reason for their conversion. The board, with the presence of at least four of its members, will then interview the applicant to “determine” within 90 days if the intention to convert is sincere and also “assess” whether the conversion is voluntary. Only after the board grants its approval will an applicant be issued a certificate of conversion, which will then have to be reported to local immigration authorities by the applicant.

The law also states that no one below the age of 18 can convert from the faith she or he was born. Besides, the legislation outlaws conversions done “with intent to insult or damage any other religion,” and “forced or coerced” conversion. These terms have been left to be defined by authorities by their own discretion.

Those found guilty of violating any prohibition will be subject to a penalty of up to two years of imprisonment and a fine of up to 200,000 kyats (\$200).

In a pragmatic move, Suu Kyi chose not to oppose or speak much against the Ma Ba Tha during the election. Therefore, members of this group are likely to continue to target minorities despite the change in the government. Moreover, Suu Kyi will need to preempt any major unrest during her party’s governance to remain in power.

In this situation, foreign powers can help. One way could be not lifting all sanctions.

Sanctions on Burma under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, a U.S. federal law, are due for renewal in the next few months. While some companies have already been taken off the black list under this law, business associations in both Burma and the United States recently wrote to Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of the Treasury Jack Lew and Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker, urging them to let the sanctions lapse for all companies and individuals.

However, such a decision needs to be opposed.

Officials in the United States should link the lifting of remaining sanctions to the degree of constitutional reforms and the success of the peace process.

Space Shrinking for Minorities in Burma

June 04, 2014

Burma's Buddhist extremist groups have been in news for inciting violent attacks on the Muslim Rohingya minority. But instead of protecting the victims, the government has proposed laws that would restrict fundamental rights not only of the Muslims but also of Christians.

A committee under the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party has drafted two laws as part of a "National Race and Religion Protection" package, the Religious Conversion Bill and the Emergency Provisions on Marriage Act for Burmese Buddhist Women.

The interfaith marriage legislation would restrict a Buddhist woman from marrying a partner outside of her religion, unless the man converts to Buddhism before marriage. The conversion bill would allow the state to decide who may convert to another religion and who may not.

The "need" for these bills was felt by the government after hundreds of Rohingya Muslims were killed by local Buddhists and tens of thousands were displaced in a deadly sectarian violence in Rakhine State in 2012.

Behind the bills is a coalition of Buddhist monks, known as the Organization for the Protection of Race, Religion, and Belief. Part of the coalition is Ashin Wirathu Thera, leader of a highly controversial and extremist campaign known as the "969 Movement," which portrays minority Muslims as a threat to the Buddhist majority. Wirathu once who described himself as the "bin Laden" of Buddhism.

After the 2012 violence, governments and human rights groups from around the world called for protection of precious lives of Rohingyas, whose ancestors were migrants from Bangladesh. However, the regime in Burma, also known as Myanmar, chose, in a political expedient move, to listen instead to Buddhist extremist groups.

While the bills are apparently aimed at the Muslim minority, given the context under which they have been proposed, the laws will restrict religious freedom of all minorities, including Christians.

Particularly the conversion bill would grossly impinge on religious freedom – although the seven-chapter draft claims that its purpose is to ensure freedom of religion and to make religious conversion transparent.

The bill would form "registration boards" in townships with the jurisdiction to examine and "approve" religious conversions. Those seeking to convert to another religion would be

required to submit an application with their personal details as well as to state the reason for their conversion. The board, with the presence of at least four of its members, would then interview the applicant to “determine” within 90 days if the intention to convert is sincere and also “assess” whether the conversion is voluntary.

Only after the board grants its approval will an applicant be issued a certificate of conversion, which would then have to be reported to local immigration authorities by the applicant.

The bill also states that no one below the age of 18 can convert from the faith she or he was born.

The legislation would outlaw conversion with intent to insult or damage any other religion, forced or coerced conversion and harassment meant to influence choice of faith – which would leave room for discretion by authorities.

Those found guilty of violating any prohibition would be subject to a penalty of up to two years of imprisonment and a fine of up to 200,000 kyats (\$200).

While the coalition of monks claim they collected 1.3 million signatures in support of the conversion law, activists and groups within Burma and abroad have expressed serious concerns over the legislation.

“It is unacceptable for people to be required to ask permission if they want to convert to another religion,” Zaw Win Aung, joint chairman of the Christian Association Council in Mandalay, told The Irrawaddy magazine. “I am worried this regulation will be similar to Article 18,” he said, referring to a law that requires Burmese people to get permission from authorities before staging protests. “They would take action if you convert to another religion without permission.”

“Burma’s government is stoking communal tensions by considering a draft law that will politicize religion and permit government intrusion on decisions of faith,” said Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch. “Following more than two years of anti-Muslim violence, this law would put Muslims and other religious minorities in an even more precarious situation.”

Adams added: “Requiring government permission to change one’s faith breaches every tenet of religious freedom and provides officials wide latitude to act arbitrarily and deny permission. The draft religion law is a recipe for further outrages against Burma’s Muslim minority. Rather than pandering to Buddhist extremists, the government should be acting to bridge the divides that threaten Burma’s fragile reform process.”

The government of President Thein Sein perhaps wants to appease Buddhist groups irrespective of their orientation or ideology, given that the next election is due next year when the popular opposition leader, Daw Aug San Suu Kyi, might also be standing for president.

The population of Burma is predominantly Buddhist, and a majority of them are from the Burman ethnic group. And most of the members of minority communities are religiously and ethnically different from Burman Buddhist people.

The proposed bills could also be an attempt to divert attention away from Suu Kyi's campaign for amendments to the constitution – which was adopted in 2008 through a referendum that was believed to be rigged and was held soon after the devastating Cyclone Nargis. The constitution still doesn't allow true democracy to arrive in a nation that was ruled by the military for decades.

The constitution establishes military's control over the government by granting the military absolute powers. It provides for the *Tatmadaw*, or the military, to appoint 25 percent of the various legislative bodies, including the national. A constitutional amendment is possible only if at least 75 percent of the national legislators vote for it.

Minority groups and individuals in Burma must express their concerns to the bill's drafting committee, which will accept recommendations for consideration until June 20, before seeking parliamentary approval. The bill is likely to be finalized and submitted to President Sein for approval by June 30.

Suu Kyi, who has always been seen as a hope for democracy and freedoms in Burma, appears to be focusing her efforts on constitutional amendment, which is a right move, but the world expects her also to speak out strongly against the growing Buddhist fundamentalism, which is fast narrowing space for minorities in the country.

What's the Scope for Reforms in Burma?

December 20, 2011

The nominally civilian government in Burma, also known as Myanmar, has surprised critics with a number of reform measures since the 2010 election. Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest, restrictions on her party have been lifted, some other political prisoners have been freed, and controls over the media and labor unions have been relaxed. To acknowledge these reforms, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a visit to the country this month.

Following Clinton's visit, WEA-RLC spoke to Burmese activists and members of the exiled ethnic Christian minorities to learn if and how these "reforms" have changed the lives of common people and improved religious freedom. Here's a summary of how they view the projected change in the wake of Burma's pursuit of international recognition.

Firstly, the official retirement of Senior General Than Shwe, who ruled the country as a military dictator for about two decades until earlier this year, is not the reason why reforms began. His retirement is one of the projections of change. His successor, President Thein Sein, is only the face of the so-called civilian government, while the military, supposedly still inspired by Than Shwe, continues to be at the helm of the country's affairs.

President Sein's government is making many moves, but there is a limit to what he is capable of offering to the international community. Before the appointment of Sein as the president, the military first secured the non-negotiable in the 2008 constitution, which was adopted through a referendum that was believed to be rigged and held soon after the devastating Cyclone Nargis. And it is with this security that the president is experimenting with reforms.

The constitution establishes military's control over the government by granting the former absolute powers. It provides for the *Tatmadaw* or the military to appoint 25 percent of the various legislative bodies, including the national. A constitutional amendment is possible only if at least 75 percent of the national legislators vote for it – which may not be possible in the foreseeable future, as the country's largest Union Solidarity and Development Party is a military's proxy party.

Unlike in other democracies, the military of Burma is not under or answerable to the civilian government. Instead, Article 6(f) provides that a key objective of the civilian government is to enable the military "to participate in the national political leadership role of the State." Even the Constitutional Tribunal, under Article 46, has not been empowered to interpret the constitution in relation of the powers and duties of the military. Article 20(f) states that the military will "safeguard" the constitution.

Moreover, the responsibilities of the military include, as per Article 20(e), safeguarding not only the non-disintegration of the Union, but also the non-disintegration of "national

solidarity,” which is too wide and vague. Furthermore, the military, and not the president, will appoint the home or interior minister, according to Article 232. And Article 60 states that the Presidential Electoral College (PEC) shall be divided into three groups, one of which will comprise army personnel representatives nominated by the Commander-in-Chief.

The constitution also provides for retrospective impunity. Article 445 says no national court in Burma will prosecute the perpetrators of *jus cogens* crimes such as violations of the Geneva Conventions, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. So the international community is expected to forgive the previous military generals for blatant violations of human rights.

Besides, Burma’s judiciary cannot be expected to be independent. The president – who is likely to cooperate with his military bosses – will nominate the Chief Justice and the judges to the national legislature, which does not have the power to reject the nominations unless the nominees do not meet the qualifications, according to Articles 299, 302, 308, 311, 327 and 334.

In addition, while the constitution grants fundamental rights to the citizens, the exceptions are too wide and vague in Article 354 – “...if not contrary to the laws, enacted for Union security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility or public order and morality.”

The same is true in the area of religious freedom. Article 364 says the abuse of religion for political purposes is forbidden – apparently to preempt involvement of Buddhist monks in protests. Moreover, any act which is intended or *is likely* to promote feelings of hatred, enmity or discord between racial or religious communities or sects will be deemed as contrary to the constitution. “A law may be promulgated to punish such activity,” it adds. Similarly, the constitution grants the right to seek redress for violations of freedoms, but it does not specify how complaints will be dealt with.

The constitution has also been designed to further repress ethnic minorities, which make up roughly 40 percent of the country’s population, rather than seek reconciliation with them. So the Burman-Buddhist dominion will also continue.

According to Article 261, the President will appoint chief ministers of the states – even in ethnic minority states that have been fighting for genuine autonomy for decades. For example, the majority-Christian Kachin state along the country’s borders with China has a Buddhist chief minister. What’s more, as per Article 6 of Schedule I, the federal government will have control over natural resources and not the states.

Tensions in ethnic states have worsened since the 2010 election. In the run up to the election, the government ended a 17-year long ceasefire agreement with a Kachin insurgent group, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). And after the election, the military waged a war against the KIO, and has been targeting even civilians.

Compass Direct News reported that the day Clinton arrived in Burma’s capital Naypyidaw on Nov. 30, government troops killed civilians and burned their houses in Kachin state. “Crimes in Northern Burma: Results from a Fact-Finding Mission to Kachin State,” a recent report by U.S.-based group Partners World carries numerous incidents highlighting torture,

extra-judicial killing, civilian casualties, human shielding, unlawful arrest, forced labor, forced relocation, displacement, property theft and destruction by Burmese soldiers.

During British rule, ethnic states like Kachin, Karen and Chin, where most Christians live, and Burman-Buddhist majority Burma Proper were administered separately. But in the wake of the independence, some ethnic leaders agreed for their areas' incorporation into Burma. This was based on the Panglong Agreement signed in 1947 which provided for full autonomy, a share of the national wealth and the right to secession to the minorities. However, the agreement's architect General Aung San, the head of the then interim government and father of Aung San Suu Kyi, was assassinated soon after the deal was struck. And subsequent governments refused to abide by the pact.

Ethnic minorities want the Union of Burma to use the Panglong Agreement as a reference point in the ongoing peace negotiations, but the government is not willing to do so. So tensions in ethnic states are likely to continue.

Christians elsewhere do not have much freedom either. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, a 2009 law essentially bans independent-house church religious venues. Only few churches have their own land in the country, and others cannot operate legally as per this law. Besides, since the late 1990s authorities have stopped issuing permits to churches to purchase land or construct church buildings. Officials have also forced the closure of numerous churches and ordered owners of apartment buildings and conference facilities not to rent their properties to religious groups.

Now what happens to existing laws and regulations like the one mentioned above? Article 446 of the constitution states: "Existing laws shall remain in operation in so far as they are not contrary to this Constitution until *and* unless they are repealed or amended by the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw [national legislature]." Similarly, Article 447 says, "Existing rules, regulations, by-laws, notifications, orders, directives and procedures shall remain in operation in so far as they are not contrary to this Constitution until *and* unless they are repealed or amended by the Union Government."

The above explains why the reforms the regime is projecting are not capable of bringing about substantial change. For example, the relaxation of press censorship is tokenism. A total of 54 journals, magazines and books will no longer have to submit their content to censors before publication. But news media, the most crucial barometer of press freedom, will continue to be subject to the repressive pre-publication censorship. Similarly, the new law granting the right to protest requires anyone planning a protest to seek approval five days before the protest and also give all speeches in writing to the authorities, which can deny permission by just stating a reason.

The international community should perhaps prepare a checklist of essential freedoms against which Burma's progress can be measured. Random reforms mean little, President Sein needs to know.

The Gathering Crisis in Burma's Ethnic Minority States

October 1, 2010

A majority of Burma's estimated 2.1 million Christians, mostly from ethnic minorities, live in states along the country's border which are most vulnerable to Burmese military regime's brutalities in the run-up to and after the November 7 elections.

The military regime, misnamed as the State Peace and Development Council (SDPC), is known as one of the world's worst violators of human rights. It has ruled Burma with an iron fist for 20 years. When the previous election was held in 1990, military generals did not honor the results and imprisoned Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party which emerged the winner.

In the 2010 election, the junta's longstanding rivalry against pro-democracy forces and ethnic minorities will manifest differently. WEA-RLC has learned from independent Burmese media and pro-democracy activists operating from neighboring countries that stakes are particularly high for ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians, in the upcoming election in Buddhist-majority Burma.

At least two disturbing developments may surface. One, the new regime is expected to launch a major military offensive on ethnic minorities, especially in the states of Karen, Kachin and Chin, which have large Christian populations. Two, the assistance the international community provides to pro-democracy forces and Burmese refugees, many of who are Christian, may take a dip.

Junta to Retain Power

The fears are primarily based on the expected overwhelming majority of pro-military legislators in the new parliament.

Irrespective of the election results, the new constitution – which will come into force when the first parliament sits in session after the election – will retain military's control over the country. The constitution guarantees at least 25 percent of seats in parliament to the military while also granting it powers to suspend civil liberties and legislative authority in the interest of "national security."

Most people were not able to read the draft constitution released only a month before the May 2008 referendum through which it was passed, noted a Human Rights Watch report. It was only available on sale in some bookshops. It is widely believed that the referendum was rigged. Besides, it was held soon after Cyclone Nargis struck southern Burma killing at least 140,000 people and displacing an estimated 2.4 million people in the Irrawaddy Delta and Rangoon, the former capital.

Apart from the reserved seats, a military-backed party is likely to get most other seats. The junta's proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), with 1,163

candidates, is the largest and the only party capable of fielding candidates in all constituencies – for seats in national as well as regional assemblies. The second largest party, the National Unity Party, with 980 candidates, is also pro-junta.

The NLD – the only pro-democracy party that could have taken on the junta – decided to boycott the election, and as a result it was disbanded by the junta-controlled Election Commission. Some members of the NLD splintered to form a separate party, the National Democratic Force, but they will not be able to field more than 164 candidates.

It is estimated that due to financial constraints and legal hurdles put up by the junta, independent democratic and ethnic minority parties will not be able to contest in even 50 percent of the constituencies. Moreover, around 2,100 democracy activists remain behind the bars as political prisoners.

Minorities in Danger

Many of Burma's ethnic minority groups – forming around 30 percent of the country's 53.4 million – have been asking for greater autonomy in their respective states since Burma's independence in 1948. The demands are partly rooted in the understanding the ethnic groups had with the British rulers at the time of the independence, and partly reaction to the military rulers' hardcore centrist approach with the agenda of Burman nationalism. It is estimated that close to 70 percent of Burma's people are ethnic Burman.

Against this backdrop, military generals see Christians and Christianity – among other ethnic and religious communities – as a threat to their rule and unionist (one nation-one people) agenda.

The ethnic Chins people from Chin state along Burma-India border are predominantly Christian. A many of the Karen and Kachin people in the states of Karen and Kachin along Burma-Thailand border are also Christian.

Sections of the ethnic minorities have formed their own armies to resist attacks by military personnel – often launched without any provocation. Most ethnic group leaders and human rights organizations say no one saves local residents in ethnic areas at the time of a military onslaught – which includes landmine explosions, rape of women, indiscriminate killing of people, forced displacement and so on – except for these independent ethnic armies. Some ethnic groups have sought ceasefire agreements with the junta, but the latter has shown no interest. The clashes carry on.

Last year, the junta asked all independent armies to join the military as border security forces without giving any assurance of autonomy or peace agreement. While a few armies joined the government forces, the others have refused. This explains why one of the emphases of the new constitution – drafted without any participation of the people or ethnic groups – is “non-disintegration” of Burma.

Most exiled journalists believe that the new junta-controlled regime will make an attempt to finish off all anti-government groups, especially the Karen, Kachin and Chin, unless they merge with the military and forsake demands for autonomy. This may take place any time

after the election in November. Casualties may include unarmed local residents, children, women and old people.

The junta's anti-Christian stand is public knowledge in Burma. In January 2007, a secret document leaked to the media from government sources revealed that the military regime wanted to wipe out Christianity in the country, according to a report in the UK's *Telegraph* daily (January 21, 2007). Titled "Programme to destroy the Christian religion in Burma," the incendiary memo contained point by point instructions on how to drive Christians out of the state, said the daily. It added that the text, which opened with the line, "There shall be no home where the Christian religion is practised," called for anyone caught evangelizing to be imprisoned.

It's not surprising that the constitution mandates the government to inculcate "patriotic spirit" and "the correct way of thinking" among the people. Moreover, it says, "The Union recognizes special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union."

While the constitution (Article 34) guarantees the freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice – the word "propagate" is missing – religion, it adds (in Article 360) that "the freedom of religious practice so guaranteed shall not debar the Union from enacting law for the purpose of public welfare and reform." It also states (in Article 364), "The abuse of religion for political purposes is forbidden. Moreover, any act which is intended or is likely to promote feelings of hatred, enmity or discord between racial or religious communities or sects is contrary to this Constitution. A law may be promulgated to punish such activity."

These provisions may look harmless and legitimate on surface, but in the absence of unambiguous definitions and given the anti-Christian slant of the military, they are likely to be misused to persecute Christians and other minorities.

Legitimacy after Election

Increased tensions in the ethnic states can lead to an increased influx of refugees in neighboring countries, such as Thailand, India, Bangladesh and Malaysia. However, given that these countries engage with Burma to meet their strategic interests, they may harden their policy towards Burmese refugees. It is estimated that roughly 150,000 Burmese are already living as refugees in Thailand along the border with Burma. India also has over 100,000 refugees from Burma. To help Burma improve its image as a new "democracy," its neighbors may expel the existing refugees or restrict the entry of new refugees. For, the presence of refugees reflects a crisis in the country of origin.

Since many nations and regional blocs give priority to strategic interests over human rights, many of them may choose to overlook the evident subversion of democratic principles in the Burma election and give legitimacy to the new regime – possibly resulting in budget cuts by international organizations and foreign governments. However, there are a few responsible and conscientious nations, blocs, organizations and individuals that are the hope for Burma. Regrettably, the junta cannot be prevented from coming to power, one way or the other, after the election. But awareness about the persistent need for peace and reconciliation – though

tripartite dialogue between the government, democratic forces and ethnic minorities – and democratic governance must be sustained.

International opinion against the Burmese junta is gaining strength.

Suu Kyi's Release Requires Cautious Response

November 15, 2010

Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's release from a two-decade long house-arrest is cause for celebration for both the people of mainland Burma who have long been subjected to authoritarian rule and the ethnic minorities seeking independence or autonomy for over 60 years. But there is a need for cautious reactions given that the military junta's move does not reflect a change of heart, but desperation to seek international community' endorsement of the apparently rigged November 7 election and leniency over an armed offensive that is soon likely to begin in ethnic areas.

The military regime has been under tremendous international pressure since 2007, when Buddhist monks joined and led anti-government protests over a sudden removal of fuel subsidies in the country, officially known as Myanmar. The government's crackdown that followed caused hundreds of deaths, including that of monks, as well as severe international criticism. And the decision to hold the election – first since 1990 when Suu Kyi's party gained victory but the military instead of giving control to her put her under arrest – was part of a public relations exercise.

However, since the international community and rights groups rightly called this month's election rigged and a sham, the junta had to win them over with something far bigger. This is why Suu Kyi, who has deservedly been the central figure of the struggle for democracy in Burma, was released. According to reports, military representatives first offered to release her under certain conditions but she refused to accept them. Yet, the military decided to let her go – unconditionally – desperate as it was to improve its image.

But it was six days *after* the election.

The election was held at a time when there were no experienced politicians. Suu Kyi and over 2,200 democracy activists were in jails, and hundreds of others had to flee to neighbouring countries in the previous years. The political prisoners have not been released, and nor is there a word from the generals whether they will be set free. Even if they are released, none of them will be part of the new regime, which will be controlled by military in civilian clothing.

The constitution – adopted by an apparent rigged referendum in 2008 – reserves 25 percent of the seats in the parliament for military's representative and empowers the military to suspend civil liberties and legislative authority in the interest of "national security." Also, the junta's proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), is the largest party that contested the polls and will soon claim an overwhelming victory. This means amending the constitution – which will require approval from at least 75 percent of the members of parliaments – is a distant dream.

So the junta first secured its place in the constitution as well as the parliament and then set Suu Kyi free. The military generals hope that with the news of Suu Kyi's release the international community will overlook the allegation of gross electoral manipulations and

accept the election results. The military leaders also want the international community to ignore the soon-to-follow major military crackdown on ethnic minorities.

While the media and the international community have thus far focused their attention on Suu Kyi – who deserves it – they have neglected the suffering of ethnic minorities, including Christians, who are caught in crossfire between armed groups and the government forces. Several factors – such as non-holding of the election in many parts of ethnic states and the recent procurement of combat-helicopters by the Burmese Air Force (BAF) – have indicated that the new regime controlled by the military will try to finish off the ethnic struggle. And the release of Suu Kyi further confirms this fear. For the military leaders could not have failed to see the high risk they face from the ethnic communities after Suu Kyi's release.

Suu Kyi will unite ethnic minorities – an effort her father Aung San, head of the interim Burmese government then, started by holding the Panglong Conference in 1947 for the unity of ethnic nationalities. He was assassinated the same year. Now Suu Kyi intends to hold a second Panglong Conference with the same objective. This will surely make the military leaders nervous. Some experts fear an assassination attack on Suu Kyi.

The junta seems in no mood to dialogue with minorities to bring about national reconciliation. The constitution they have framed over-stresses on non-disintegration of the Union, which does not mean reconciliation to say the least. Moreover, it makes state administrations highly dependent on the federal government – for example, resources in states will be under the control of the Union. And most ethnic states are rich in resources. Before the election, the military regime had asked all ethnic armed groups to join the military-controlled Border Guard Force. But many of the groups refused to merge.

Tensions have begun in ethnic minority states – also in areas controlled by ceasefire armed groups. According to reports, the Burmese army intensified its operations in ethnic states around the election time and ethnic armies have formed a loose coalition and taken positions for a possible war with the Burma Army. During the election week, fighting between some of the armed groups and the military personnel erupted in several states, including in Karen, Kachin, Karenni and Mon. As a result, thousands of people from these states fled to Thailand side of the border.

Most ethnic minorities live in states bordering Thailand, India and China. They make up around 30 percent of Burma's 53.4 million people, and have been asking for independence/autonomy since Burma's independence in 1948. They say the British had promised them the right to self-rule. In recent years, their struggle has mainly been against Burman, Buddhist nationalism adopted by, and the authoritarian centrist rule of, the Burmese regime. Close to 70 percent of Burma's people are estimated to be ethnic Burman, mostly Buddhist.

The ethnic Chin and Kachin people are predominantly Christian. And many of the Karen and Karenni people are also Christian. There are armed groups in Chin, Karen and Kachin states as well (though not all residents are armed), and the junta sees all Christians, and their religion, as a threat to its dominion.

If a war breaks out between ethnic armies and the Burmese forces, as feared, civilian casualties could be alarmingly high. Therefore, Burmese army's apparent plan to attack minorities must be exposed and prevented.

It is time not to give any concession to the military leaders of Burma in response to Suu Kyi's release, but to continue to lobby all concerned organizations and blocs, including UN bodies, the ASEAN, the European Union and the governments of the United States, India, Thailand and China, to avert the gathering storm in ethnic states.

How will North Korean Succession affect Christians?

October 21, 2010

One of the world's most secretive, isolated and authoritarian regimes, North Korea, is expected to have a change in the leadership. Does this mean anything for the persecuted Christians in the communist nation?

North Korea has never had democracy. Since its formation in 1948, the nation has been ruled by a one party, the Korea Worker's Party, led by one family, the Kims. The current leader, 68-year-old Kim Jong-Il, is believed to have suffered a stroke in 2008. He is also known to have other chronic health problems, including diabetes, kidney problems and hypertension. And he loves alcohol. His youngest son, 28-year-old Kim Jong-un, who was recently given key positions in the regime, is likely to be his successor.

The likely succession is significant because it concerns a nuclear-armed regime that has been one of the world's worst violators of human rights and one of the greatest threats to the world peace.

On the recommendations of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the State Department has designated atheist North Korea as a Country of Particular Concern since 2001. Indoctrinated and intimidated by the regime, a majority of the 24 million people in the country are non-religious. While there are a few state-controlled Christian churches, such as in the capital city of Pyongyang, they are meant to showcase "religious freedom." Contrary to its constitution, the regime represses activities of "unauthorized" religious groups. Most believers, estimated to be over 450,000 (as per the Center for the Study of Global Christianity), are part of the underground church.

Recently, a 50-year-old North Korean Christian, Son Jong Nam, was tortured to death in a prison as he was caught with 20 Bibles and 10 cassette tapes of hymns, reported Associated Press in July 2010.

According to the National Human Rights Commission of South Korea, "North Korea runs six large prison camps for political prisoners that together hold an estimated 200,000 inmates [one in every 100 people in the country is in jail, most likely facing death] and are used as a key tool to suppress potential dissidents and tame famine-hit people by spreading a sense of fear," United Press International (UPI) reported in January 2010. It is believed that many of these inmates were imprisoned for their faith in or preaching Christianity. "The inmates are suffering starvation, torture, forced labor, rape and executions out of global attention," added UPI.

It is also estimated that over two million people have died of starvation and malnutrition in the last two decades due to natural disasters and economic mismanagement in the country.

Anticipating Change

Will there be any change – for better or for worse – before or after the succession?

Above all, the North Korean regime wants to maintain its control over the country which requires it to balance the external threat and meet economic needs at home. The persecution of Christians can be understood in this context. For Christians are seen as a Western-influenced threat to the government. And the future of Christians depends on the compulsions the new regime will face to hold its grip on power.

Implications of the planned succession can be anticipated keeping in mind at least possible outcomes from the succession plan. There are at least three, according to a paper written by Bruce Klingner, a senior research fellow at the US-based Heritage Foundation and former official from the US intelligence.

The succession may take place successfully, for there is no opposition to the leadership of the Kim family. Like a dictator of other isolated, authoritarian regimes – Burma for example – Kim Jong-Il deposes intelligence personnel to spy on government officials and creates a competition between the officials so that no one feels secure. He also delegates members of the elite to keep an eye on each other to pre-empt formation of any grouping against the regime.

Moreover, Kim Jong-Il has reshuffled important positions within the party and has consolidated all powers in the National Defense Commission (NDC), which he currently heads – and is likely to be headed by his son as part of the succession. In February 2010, he also sought to defuse public anger over the government's move to revalue its currency – which adversely affected people's savings – by sacking a top official. For people's support will be crucial for the succession. If everything goes as planned in the succession, there will be little change in the regime's policy and persecution and repression will carry on.

However, it cannot be said with certainty that the succession will not be challenged by some members of the elite from within the party. Founder of the nation Kim Il-sung virtually gave the charge of the country's affairs to his son, Kim Jong-Il, the current leader, a few years before he was officially made the leader. But the inexperienced Kim Jong-un may not have that privilege. It is therefore possible that his leadership will be questioned, especially after his father's death, if he fails to prove his skills in ruling the country and securing the interests of the regime.

A third possibility, i.e. the collapse of the regime, though unlikely, cannot be ruled out. If made the leader, Kim Jong-un will face many challenges as the country's economy is in a state of decay and the international pressure is mounting. If he fails to deliver and command respect within the party, especially after the death of Kim Jong-Il, it can lead to a power struggle among the elite and may also lead to a civil war or a major internal unrest, making international intervention inevitable.

Most Worrisome

Irrespective of which of the possibilities comes true, the North Korean regime knows it is facing an unstable future. And that should be the biggest cause for concern.

Whenever this nation perceives any threat from within or from outside, it tends to become more aggressive in its foreign as well as domestic policy. North Korea has the tendency to show its strength to both its own people and external agencies or governments each time it faces or apprehends a crisis. So, at home, it is now likely to take some populist measures to avert public anger, but, at the same time, it will deal with any sign of dissent even more harshly.

“One troubling aspect of this change [succession] is that the new leader may feel the need to resort to brute force more frequently in order to suppress popular resistance,” said Yoon Young-kwan, former South Korean foreign minister, in an opinion article that appeared in The Daily Star on September 30, 2010.

Furthermore, during the transition to and after the succession, tensions are likely to mount in the Chinese border towns, an escape route for North Korean defectors. For one of China’s main concerns in North Korea is to maintain stability in the country lest there is an increased influx of refugees. So there could be stricter vigil in the border areas possibly as a joint-operation by Chinese and North Korean border security personnel.

However, there is hope. Due to its economic concerns, the new North Korean regime may not be able to isolate itself completely from the rest of the world. It will need to engage with the international community, which can encourage economic reforms in North Korea as a first step. Analysts believe that North Korea may eventually go the Chinese way by adopting state-controlled capitalism and opening up its borders for trade with other countries. Once it is out of isolation, it will be under greater obligation to improve its human rights record. All other pressures have worked little in this country.

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Why Russia Persecutes Non-Orthodox Churches

October 4, 2012

Russian police demolished Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church in Moscow last month. The members of the church now gather near the ruins for worship, bearing testimony to the continued persecution of "non-traditional," or disfavored, religious groups after President Vladimir Putin assumed office about five months ago.

It is estimated that 90 percent of ethnic Russians - and around 70 percent of all Russian citizens - identify themselves as Orthodox. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russians have closely associated Orthodoxy with national identity, replacing socialism with Orthodoxy. However, people's association with the Russian Orthodox Church is apparently more symbolic than representative of their commitment to the substance of the faith. This is perhaps why the church attendance is extremely low.

Russia's 1993 Constitution states that all religious associations are equal before the law. However, the preamble of the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, enacted in 1997 under President Boris N. Yeltsin to define the state's relationship with religion, says respect should be accorded firstly to Orthodoxy, and secondly to Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and [non-Orthodox] Christianity.

Non-Orthodox Christian groups in Russia are seen as rooted in the United States in particular and the West in general, and competing with the Orthodox Church for membership. And both the government - for which a key priority is to protect "Holy Russia" from "foreign devils" - and the Orthodox Church, which is allegedly closely associated with the government, are anti-West.

The Russian government also seeks to restrict the functioning of independent organizations that are not allied with it or show any sign of dissent.

The relationship between the Kremlin (the official residence of the President) and the Orthodox Church is partly based on their common nationalistic ideology which seeks to restore Russia's might after the Soviet Union's fall. The 1977 law on religious associations, commonly known as the religion law, was enacted at a time when missionaries from Protestant faiths in the West began working in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Russian Orthodox Church was born in 988 AD with Prince Vladimir being baptized in the River Dnieper with all the inhabitants of Kiev. Since the conflict between the Patriarch of the East and the Pope of the West was at peak at the time, the Russian Church and people inherited the Eastern Church's antagonism to Rome and the West and shared its isolation

from the Renaissance, the Reformation and the rise of modern concepts of social Christianity, explains a 1961 article by Paul B. Anderson in the Foreign Affairs magazine.

"Instead, the Russian Orthodox Church entered the twentieth century with the religious outlook developed no later than the Seventh Ecumenical Council, held in 787," Anderson adds. "The Russians claim with pride that the Orthodox Church is the true Church of the Apostles, the Scripture, the creeds and the canons accepted in the first seven Councils, and they look gingerly at all other churches, which, they say, separated from it at the time of the Great Schism."

At an event in May this year, which was part of the Council on Foreign Relations' (CFR) Religion and Foreign Policy Conference Call series, Leonid Kishkovsky, director of external affairs and interchurch relations for the Orthodox Church in America, spoke about the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin as they exist today. He noted that during protests against Putin's candidacy for re-election in February, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, said the government must listen to the people and society, "putting himself in a mediating role." And soon after that, the Patriarch supported Putin's candidacy. Patriarch Kirill described Putin as "naturally the presidential candidate with the best chances" and praised him for playing a role in correcting the course of Russian history.

Patriarch Kirill recently said that close ties between the church and the state were good for society. "The institution of power appeared in the world, in a society prone to sin, to safeguard this society so that people could live together," Reuters quoted the Patriarch as saying in a speech at Moscow State University on Sept. 28. "So, clear and very definite support by the Orthodox Church for the institution of state authorities does not amount to an assessment of this or that politician or state figure by every representative of the church," he added. "But it is indispensable to understand that safeguarding the institution of power is a guarantee of a flourishing society."

At the CFR event, Kishkovsky also said that Orthodoxy is in the public square in Russia today, adding that there are tensions between the Russian Orthodox Church and "non-traditional" groups. "Extremism is seen as a characteristic of activities of some 'non-traditional' religions," he said. The Orthodox Church does not happily accept the presence of "non-traditional" groups in Russia, and "non-traditional" groups have also been extremely aggressive against the Orthodox Church, he added. It is easier to have an inter-faith dialogue in the country than an inter-Christian dialogue, he went on to say.

The Russian Orthodox Church is definitely not monolithic, but some influential leaders of the church are known for their open advocacy against non-traditional faiths. For example, Alexander Dvorkin, who heads a council of experts for conducting state religious studies expert analysis, was an outspoken proponent of categorizing minority religious groups, including neo-Pentecostals, as "extremist cults" and "totalitarian sects," according to Forum 18.

Persecution of non-traditional groups is likely to remain, or even grow, under Putin. While President Dmitry Medvedev, in office from 2008 until the March 2012 election, strengthened the role and influence of the Orthodox Church in society, Putin is further urging the state to favor "traditional religions," indicates a recent, detailed survey by Forum 18. "Yet having

obtained what he needed – support from religious leaders during the crucial run-up to election – it remains to be seen whether he [Putin] will deliver on such promises [referring to Putin's January manifesto article which argued that state and society should support the role of 'traditional religions' in the military, educational and social spheres.]. Even if not, Putin's position still amounts to greater patronage of 'traditional religions' than during his previous presidential terms, as he has not contested the substantial gains made by the Patriarchate during his (nominal) absence from the Kremlin."

As Kishkovsky said at the CFR event, a serious and intense debate is taking place within the Russian Orthodox Church on various issues, including its association with the Kremlin and the treatment of non-traditional groups, which raises the hope for religious freedom for all groups in the future. In the meantime, international groups could also engage the Russian church's leadership, urging it to dialogue with "non-traditional" groups.

Hope for Religious Freedom in Belarus

January 3, 2011

The former Soviet state of Belarus in Eastern Europe is one of the worst violators of religious and other freedoms. The country's strongman president, Alexander Lukashenko, has been in office since 1994 by virtually wiping out opposition and rigging elections. He secured a fourth term in office by an allegedly fraudulent election last month (December 2010), and the next vote is five years away. So is there hope for change?

Many lost hope after a recent crackdown by the authoritarian regime on those protesting the fraudulent election. On December 19, thousands of people flooded the streets of the national capital, Minsk, to register their protests against the election that gave a landslide victory to Lukashenko. Many were arrested and beaten, including young women and most of the nine opposition presidential candidates.

The severe international condemnation that followed had little effect on the President. A day later, he shut down the office of the human rights watchdog, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), in operation since 2003, as its monitors had reported flaws in the election.

Then, he sent a feel-good Christmas message to the Christian-majority population. "I wholeheartedly congratulate you on Christmas. For all Christians, Christmas is a source of faith, purity and sincerity. It teaches us compassion and humanity, and therefore helps us become better, more humane, and more honest... On these days we very clearly understand that peace on our land depends on us. Only together, by joining efforts, we can maintain peace in our common Belarusian home and make it even richer and more beautiful," read the message.

Lukashenko is an "Orthodox atheist," as he describes himself. But a majority of the 10 million Belarusians are not. Around 60 percent of the people consider themselves religious, according to data from the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs. Over 82 percent belong to the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), which enjoys a special status with the government, though only on paper. Roughly 12 percent are Roman Catholic, four percent Muslim, Hare Krishna devotees and Baha'is. Protestant groups account for just two percent of the population.

The regime led by "Europe's Mugabe" – Lukashenko is often called – heavily regulates religious groups. The constitution promises legal equality and freedom for all religious communities, but it also provides for government regulation pertaining to "their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people."

A 2002 religion law recognises traditional faiths, especially the Orthodox Church, and also Catholicism and Evangelical Lutheranism as well as Islam and Judaism. However, it excludes newer groups as well as some denominations dating back to the 17th century such as the Priestless Old Believers and Calvinist Churches.

The 2002 law provides for strict government control over the functioning of churches and other religious institutions. It requires registration of all groups, and the formalities are so complex that authorities can deny registration to any or all groups on technical grounds. Unregistered groups are not allowed to function. And any activity by an unregistered group is punishable by heavy fines and/or three-year imprisonment. Religious communities are allowed to work only in areas where they are registered. Moreover, religious groups are required to receive prior government approval to import or distribute literature.

The ideology of the Belarusian regime is post-Soviet left-wing conservatism and therefore it cares little about democracy or religious freedom and other civil rights. However, the repression is apparently rooted in Lukashenko's lust for power more than anything else.

Lukashenko became more autocratic after a wave of revolution began to sweep across the region, including in former Soviet states. Dictatorial Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic had to resign in 2000 amid widespread demonstrations against the disputed election that year. The "Rose Revolution" in Georgia – marked by massive protests over the fraudulent elections – forced President Eduard Shevardnadze to resign in 2003. A year later, the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, involving protests over the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, led to the collapse of the government. In 2005, the "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan following the parliamentary election in 2005 also saw a change of power.

To pre-empt any such attempts by progressive sections of the people and the opposition in Belarus, Lukashenko further tightened control over economic activities, the parliament, the courts and the media, and began to eliminate civil society. Over the years, the Lukashenko regime succeeded in consolidating its control over the country, socially, culturally and politically.

The Belarusian government owns around 80 percent of all industry and is the main employer. And the government employs workers on short-term contracts to be able to punish disloyalty of any sort with the refusal to renew contracts.

Lukashenko's problem with religion should be seen against the same backdrop. Religion has a potential to mobilise people around a cause of justice, especially in a country where the rights of religious groups are restricted. And some churches have sought change openly. For example, the New Life Church organised a hunger strike and sought participation of other churches in 2006 to seek amendment to the 2002 religion law – though the movement did not result in the repeal of restrictive clauses in the law. In addition, many opposition leaders are known to be committed Christians.

The European Union and the United States have made efforts to encourage reforms in Belarus but with little success. Lukashenko has shown his diplomatic skills by taking advantage of Belarus' strategic location between Russia and Europe.

With the promise of integration with Russia, Lukashenko has exploited Moscow, which gives highly subsidised oil to Belarus thereby helping it to survive, and even prosper to some extent. While Russia knows that Lukashenko has done little towards the creation of the Union State and its relations with Belarus fluctuate at times, Moscow doesn't want to lose Belarus to the EU entirely.

Initially, the EU sought to bring about change in Belarus by the “stick” – banning the President and high officials from travelling to Europe, for example. But isolation of Belarus achieved little. In 2008, the European block lifted the ban and promised aid hoping “carrots” will do what the “stick” could not, but that too failed the block. Partly, the change in EU’s policy came to deal with the consequences of the Russia-Georgia war – Russia was expected to offer sops to Belarus to seek its support.

Coercive diplomacy has little scope in Belarus also because it has few links to European institutions. Belarus is member of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which is dominated by Russia. Also, Lukashenko seems to be avoiding both, membership of the EU and any substantial integration with Russia.

With Russia having understood that a real integration of Russia and Belarus is nowhere in sight, it may not provide oil with high subsidies for very long – putting the regime in trouble given that the people have got used to a fairly high standard of life. And that may force Lukashenko to liberalise its economy and thereby pave the way for political change – unless Belarus chooses to woo investments from Venezuela, China and Iran as an alternative.

However difficult, the change in Belarus is not impossible.

As an alternative to – or to supplement – the-carrot-and-stick approach, the EU could seek to establish a closer link with the Belarusian society in general and civil society actors in particular. Many non-governmental organisations exist in Belarus – though they do not openly participate in political activities – and if strengthened and supported, they will be capable of leading change.

Building public opinion for religious and other freedoms is equally imperative. Blocks and rights groups could support independent media, give grants and fellowships to Belarusian students and scholars, and promote any other activities to inform and educate the people of Belarus.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church in particular should be lobbied for affecting public opinion. Although there is separation of church and state in the country – and the support of the latter to the Orthodox Church is insignificant – being a large organisation, some of its leaders can help shape people’s opinion in a strategic and sensitive way.

Meanwhile, Lukashenko's support base, comprising mainly the older generation and rural population who still take pride in the nation’s Soviet past, is evidently fading out. On the other hand, the people are increasingly plucking up the courage to unite and speak against the government’s unjustifiable practises – as was evident on December 19 when hundreds of thousands of them protested against the election result. And that's the hope.

How to Deal with Refugees' Plight in Europe?

Academics are calling it Europe's "migrant" crisis, and some sympathetic media are terming it as the continent's "refugee" crisis, both focusing on the "problem" faced by Europe. Lost in these analyses is the suffering of nearly 600,000 people, some of them Christian, who, fleeing war, persecution and oppression, have crossed the dangerous Mediterranean Sea to reach a region that is unwilling to give them asylum.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that at least 3,100 people have lost their lives in the Mediterranean since the beginning of the year, due to bad weather conditions and overcrowded vessels of smugglers and human traffickers they used to cross the sea. And many of the tens of thousands, including women and children, who have made it to Europe are being detained without food or water. Others are being abused or exploited, as they remain without shelter or hope.

The governments of the frontline states of Greece and Italy as well as the European Union are faced with an unusual situation, not knowing what to do with the people who are arriving not only from Syria, but also from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Iraq.

More than 450,000 people have arrived by sea to Greece, of which at least 277,899 are from Syria, 76,620 from Afghanistan, 21,552 from Iraq, and 14,323 from Pakistan. In Italy, the number of arrivals is at least 137,313, of which 35,938 are from Eritrea, 17,886 from Nigeria, 10,050 from Somalia, 8,370 from Sudan, and 7,072 from Syria.

How they are treated depends on how we see them. In international law, which provides for assistance and protection for those fleeing persecution or conflict, an asylum seeker is someone whose claims are yet to be proven, after which they can be called refugee. An economic migrant, on the other hand, is someone who arrives in a foreign land for economic gain.

Given the nationalities of these people, they all appear to be legitimate asylum seekers, and must be treated accordingly.

Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, is mindlessly killing civilians in Syria amid a bloody civil war against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and has captured large territories in Iraq. The targeted killings and persecution of Christians in Syria and Iraq are nothing less than genocide. More than 700,000 of Syria's Christian population of 1.1 million have been displaced due to attacks by ISIS. And in Iraq, at least 125,000 Christians have fled their homes in the Nineveh Plains to the autonomous Kurdistan region.

Afghans are fleeing attacks in the wake of insurgencies by the Taliban and Islamic State's local affiliate. Eritreans are running away from forced lifelong military conscripts by their authoritarian government.

Nigerians fear for their lives amid increasing attacks by the Islamist terror group Boko Haram, which has killed thousands of Christians and bombed churches.

In Somalia, the Islamist terror group al-Shabaab is a major threat to the lives of civilians. In north-west Pakistan, insurgencies have killed tens of thousands of people. Civil wars in Sudan's Darfur and Kordofan regions have also killed numerous civilians.

What's worse, none of these countries are likely to have peace in the near future, and, therefore, the number of arrivals in Europe is only going to increase, especially of Christians from across the Middle East and Yazidis from Iraq – the main targets among civilians.

However, as Amnesty International has noted, "Ignoring the reasons pushing people to the EU such as conflict and human rights violations, EU leaders have focused on blocking their entry with abusive border control measures, as well as through practices or legislation which effectively deny them the right to seek asylum."

The Dublin Regulation, a European Union law, states that it is the responsibility of entry-point countries for "migrants," requiring asylum seekers to remain in the first European country they enter to apply for asylum. Those who cross over to other countries in the block can be deported back to the country they originally entered.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has proposed that 120,000 asylum seekers be relocated across EU nations, on top of the relocation of 40,000 refugees in Greece and Italy. This is just a fraction of the total number of asylum seekers and the proposal has some other flaws, but the premise on which this proposal is based needs to be replicated by world leaders.

Just as this proposal seeks to ease pressure on the frontline EU countries and even as the European Union needs to do much more, world leaders could make efforts to accept asylum seekers in their countries to show solidarity with both Europe and asylum seekers.

U.S. Congress should also move a pending bill, H.R. 1568, the "Protecting Religious Minorities Persecuted by ISIS Act of 2015," which could address the need for saving the lives of Christians in Iraq and Syria.

The bill mandates the Secretary of State to establish or use existing refugee processing mechanisms in Iraq and in other countries through which aliens from Iraq or Syria who have been persecuted, or have a credible fear of being persecuted, by ISIL, or a similar group, based on gender or religious or ethnic membership may apply directly to the United States Refugee Admissions Program for priority 2 refugee admission to the United States.

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It's Time U.S. Condemned Religious Abuses in Saudi Arabia

August 8, 2013

Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser, the vice chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), last week described Saudi Arabia as “the poster country” for religious restrictions, and shared his frustration over America’s reluctance to condemn the Wahhabi Sunni kingdom.

“If we were to write...how you would define a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) that restricts religious freedom, Saudi Arabia would be the poster country,” Jasser said in an interview with The Christian Post.

On the recommendation of the USCIRF, Saudi Arabia has been on the State Department’s list of CPCs since 2004. However, the U.S. government has been waiving sanctions that the CPC designation brings with it since 2006.

To show Washington’s failure in Saudi Arabia, Jasser pointed to the recent sentencing of a cyber-activist, Raef Badawi, by a Jeddah criminal court. The activist was sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes for allegedly offending Islam and violating the kingdom’s cyber-crime law.

“The only thing Mr. Badawi appears to be guilty of is creating a platform on the Internet for religious debate in Saudi Arabia, a right he is guaranteed to under international law,” Jasser’s colleague and USCIRF chairman, Robert George, told another news outlet.

Such sentencing is commonplace in the kingdom.

In May, the Saudi Gazette reported that a court sentenced a Christian Lebanese man, accused of helping a Saudi women convert to Christianity, to six years in prison and 300 lashes. The daughter was also sentenced to six years and 300 lashes, but she reportedly fled to Sweden.

In February, the WEA-RLC reported that Saudi authorities arrested 53 Ethiopian Christians –46 women and six men – who were attending a worship service in the private, rented home of an Ethiopian believer in Dammam, the capital of the Eastern Province. They were charged with trying to convert Muslims to Christianity.

Saudi Arabia’s royal family thinks it is their responsibility to protect Islam’s two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, and spread the strict brand of the Wahhabi school of Sunni Islam, which has a tendency to breed militant Islamists and promote religious restrictions for minorities. For example, most of the 19 hijackers in the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States were Saudi.

Neither the government nor the Saudi Basic Law provides for religious freedom. On the contrary, all citizens are bound by the government's interpretation of Sharia law.

There are more than 1.5 million Christians, mostly Catholics, who are non-citizens. They are allowed to worship only at home, but the kingdom's religious police are known for cracking down even on private religious services.

It is against the Saudi law for Muslims to abandon their faith, and proselytizing for other religions is also illegal. Both blasphemy and apostasy are punishable by death.

While there are churches in Kuwait, Oman, Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, no non-Muslim religious place of worship is allowed in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has also sought to influence other nations on the Arabian Peninsula. Last March, the Middle East Forum reported that Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, declared that it is "necessary to destroy all the churches of the region."

The main role of the Grand Mufti is to issue *fatwas* (opinion) on legal and social affairs, which heavily influences the Saudi court system. He is the highest authority on Islamic law in the birthplace of Islam, and, therefore, such a provocative statement by him can have far-reaching effects. Yet, no Western nation condemned it.

The Saudi government seeks to justify repression under the pretext of fighting radical Muslims. "The monarchy claims to be sort of victims of this conservative movement," Jasser said in the interview. "They say, 'if we move too quickly, it will be taken over by an Islamic regime.'" However, on the other hand, the government feeds "these ideologies, creates the radical monster, and then uses it as a foil to legitimize dictatorship and repression of free speech, and especially freedom of religion," he added.

Saudi Arabia has showcased limited reforms, and yet the United States and other Western nations have regrettably allowed the kingdom to evade sanctions.

Years ago, the Saudi government promised to reform their textbooks, but in reality the kingdom's education system still indoctrinates children with hatred and incitement. For example, a Class IX textbook published by the Ministry of Education reads, "The Jews and the Christians are enemies of the believers, and they cannot approve of Muslims." A textbook for Class VIII states, "The Apes are the people of the Sabbath, the Jews; and the Swine are the infidels of the communion of Jesus, the Christians."

While Saudi Arabia itself is one of the worst violators of religious freedom, King Abdullah started a center for religious dialogue in Vienna, and has sponsored an inter-faith conference in Spain.

The USCIRF has recommended that the indefinite waiver on Saudi Arabia be replaced with a 180-day waiver, but its call has not been heeded. "Religious freedom in Saudi Arabia has not been a U.S. priority in the bilateral relationship and, as a consequence, the U.S. government has not adequately held to account the Saudi government on its implementation of reforms," the commission said in its 2013 report.

“The Saudi absolute regime feels safe to do whatever it wants and gets away with it,” Ali Alyami, executive director of the U.S.-based Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, told CNSNews.com last week. “This is due to the fact that the Saudi ruling family can rely on lobbyists, universities, major media outlets, think tanks, many members of Congress and big companies to get things done on its behalf in Washington and in other Western capitals.”

Saudi Arabia has wealth, and is strategically important to the United States due to strategic reasons, including the kingdom’s oil reserves, its ability to help Washington to have good relations with the Muslim world and the common opposition to Iran.

However, the United States’ failure to address religious freedom and human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia does not reflect Washington’s inability, but lack of will. As Alyami said, “The U.S. has tremendous leverage that it could use to make the Saudis sweat.”

WEA-RLC Research and Analysis Report

Does Egypt's Draft Constitution Provide for Religious Freedom?

December 06, 2012

The Constituent Assembly of Egypt came out with a draft constitution on Nov. 29, and a referendum will be held for its adoption on Dec. 15. The draft prepared by the Islamist-dominated assembly shows where the Muslim Brotherhood stands on the role of Shari'a in public life and human rights as understood by the international community.

President Mohamed Morsi, who is from the Brotherhood's political wing, is going ahead with the constitutional referendum despite an ongoing uprising over his Nov. 22 declaration that no one - not even the courts - can challenge his decisions until a new constitution is in place. Morsi wants people to believe that the constituent assembly hurried to prepare the draft, and the referendum is being held in haste, so that the period of his newly acquired supreme authority is short.

However, anti-Morsi protests increased after the date of the referendum was announced. The president did not want to give enough time to the people to discuss the proposed provisions.

On Nov. 18, a day before Tawadros II was officially enthroned as the new pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the interim pope announced the withdrawal of all church representatives from the 100-member constituent assembly lest the draft constitution had the church's stamp of approval on it. Non-Islamist parties also pulled out, decrying marginalization.

While the draft the assembly has prepared is not entirely according to the demands of the nation's ultra-conservative Salafi forces, its provisions are a cause for serious concern for those who care for religious freedom.

Salafi representatives pushed for re-wording of Article 2 as "the rules of Sharia are the main source of legislation." While their calls were not fully heeded, the article does say that "the principles of Shari'a" will be the basis for law. "Islam is the state religion, its official language Arabic, and the principles of Islamic Shari'a are the main source of legislation," it reads as per an unofficial English translation.

Salafis also wanted Article 5 to say that "Sovereignty is for God alone." The article, however, states, "Sovereignty belongs to the people who exercise and protect it, safeguard national unity, and authority is derived from them, all in the manner set out in the constitution." The previous constitution under former President Hosni Mubarak stated, "Sovereignty is for the people alone." The word, "alone," has been dropped.

According to Article 3, Christians and Jews will have their own religious laws concerning personal and religious matters. However, the Baha'i community has not been included in this article. "For Egyptian Christians and Jews, the principles of their religious laws are the main source of legislation in personal and religious matters as well as in the selection of their spiritual leaders," the article states.

Salafi politicians also advocated for giving the Al Azhar Islamic university the final say in defining Shari'a. Their demands were not fully met, but Article 4 does provide that the

institution will have an advisory role. This is problematic given that a body that is purely Sunni and not elected by the people will have a key role in deciding what constitutes Shari'a. The article states: "Al-Azhar is an independent Islamic body and it alone addresses its internal affairs. Its scope covers the Muslim nation and the entire world. It spreads religious studies and the call to Islam. The state guarantees sufficient funds for it to achieve its goals. The law determines the method for selecting Al-Azhar's Grand Imam, who shall be independent and cannot be removed from office. The opinion of Al-Azhar's Council of Grand Scholars shall be taken in matters related to Islamic Shari'a."

According to Article 6, "shura," which is not elected, will be the basis of the political system. It also revokes a ban in the former constitution on political parties based on religion. It instead prohibits parties based on discrimination. "The political system is based on the principles of democracy and shura (counsel), citizenship (under which all citizens are equal in rights and duties), multi-party pluralism, peaceful transfer of power, separation of powers and the balance between them, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and freedoms; all as elaborated in the Constitution. Political parties may not be established on basis of discriminating between citizens on grounds of sex, origin or religion," it states.

Article 11 defines Egyptian culture and society in Arab terms. "The state protects the cultural, civilizational and linguistic unity of Egyptian society, and works towards Arabisation of sciences and knowledge," the article reads.

Article 43 limits religious freedom to "heavenly religions" - Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, recognized as "heavenly" by the state. "Freedom of belief is an inviolable right. The State shall guarantee the freedom to practice religious rites and to establish places of worship for the divine religions, as regulated by law," it states.

Article 44 carries a provision for an anti-blasphemy law. The article reads: "Insult or abuse of all religious messengers and prophets shall be prohibited."

The previous constitution gave the right to "statutory bodies" to petition in the name of a collective. Its mention has now been removed in Article 54 in an apparent attempt to exclude the church. "Every individual has the right to address public authorities in writing and under his own signature. Addressing public authorities should not be in the name of groups, with the exception of juridical persons," states the article.

The previous constitution stated that one of the duties of the president is to protect national unity, which has traditionally been understood as Muslim-Christian relations. However, Article 132 removes that as a presidential duty, and reads, "The President is the Head of State and chief of the executive authority. He looks after the interests of the people, safeguards the independence and territorial integrity of the motherland, and observes the separation between powers."

Article 212 provides for the formation of a new body with wide powers to regulate and oversee both public and private endowments. This can be seen as an attempt to put the church under Islamist control. "The High Authority for Endowment Affairs regulates, supervises and monitors public and private endowments, ensures their adherence to sensible administrative and economic standards, and raises awareness about endowments in society," the article states.

The Muslim Brotherhood has claimed that it wants to Islamize the nation only gradually and peacefully, and with the consensus of Egypt's citizens. However, the way the constituent assembly functioned, the provisions the draft constitution carries, and the haste in which the constitutional referendum is being held, all point towards a covert and crafty attempt to undermine religious freedom for minorities against the wishes of the people.

What Lies Ahead in Egypt?

June 22, 2012

Tens of thousands of Egyptians are once again converging on Cairo's Tahrir Square following the decision of the military generals to postpone the results of the runoff presidential election that were expected on June 21. The protests are also against the military council's move to strip the president's office of its most important powers.

Meanwhile, the two presidential candidates, former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq and leader of Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party Mohammed Morsi, are both claiming victory. Morsi, who Christians fear will marginalize the minority, seems more likely to win initially according to media reports, but some claim Shafiq is using back room deals to ensure his victory.

However, just as the votes were being counted on June 17, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which has been ruling the country since the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, announced amendments to the interim constitution, granting key powers to itself.

The amended constitution says the armed forces will have absolute authority to run its affairs, independent of the new president. It states that the elected head of government can decide to go to war only if the SCAF approves it. It has also returned legislative powers to the generals until fresh parliamentary elections are held – a court ordered parliament dissolved last week. In addition, the generals will now maintain authority over the drafting of a new constitution.

Many fear that Morsi's victory would increase the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood over all branches of the state. Some even dread the possibility of an Islamist hijack of the revolution – as happened in Iran – and think it would be difficult to remove the Islamists from power if they establish control over all state institutions.

However, the generals' move to grab power was apparently to pre-empt efforts by the Muslim Brotherhood to diminish the military's role in the country once the Islamist group comes to power. For, the enmity between the military – which has huge business interests and has ruled the country for six decades – and the Muslim Brotherhood dates back to the early 1950s when army officers overthrew the monarchy in a coup.

The military has pledged to transfer power to the winner by the end of June, but the new president is expected to be in office only for a few months. A call for fresh presidential election might follow the drafting and implementation of the new constitution.

If the election results are shown in favor of Shafiq – especially after the power grab by the military council – a deadly confrontation between supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as revolutionary forces and the military might ensue. It could also lead to targeting of Christians due to the perception that all Copts voted for Shafiq, one of Mubarak's most trusted men and who pledged to give Christians the place they deserve as equal citizens in the country.

Egyptians will now tend to be more receptive of Morsi winning the election, but they are clearly disillusioned with the election per se.

In the first round of the presidential election held in May, Morsi and Shafiq got only about a quarter of the vote each. Despite the two candidates having the backing of their respective powerful organizations with strong political and social networks, none was able to secure the threshold of over 50 percent votes to win. On the other hand, secular candidate Hamdeen Sabahi got 21.6 percent of the vote with little organizational support. He also won in Alexandria, which is seen as a Muslim Brotherhood stronghold.

The notion that Shafiq secure the second position mainly with the support of Copts, who account for about 10 percent of Egypt's population, is flawed. While many Copts saw Shafiq as a candidate who had the clout to take on Morsi, the bulk of his votes in the first round came from predominantly rural provinces where few Copts live.

What the first round of elections actually showed was well articulated by commentator Hani Shukrallah in an analysis that appeared in the local *ahramonline* newspaper. "The electoral triumph of the Mubarak regime on one hand and that of its no less authoritarian historical antagonist, the Brotherhood, on the other, heralds not their ascent but their decline," he wrote. "It is not a new dawn of the Muslim Brotherhood that we are witnessing, nor is it a revival of the semi-secular police state à la Mubarak, Gaddafi et al, but rather the twilight of both."

Neither Shafiq nor Morsi represent the will of the country's revolutionary forces, which are in majority. One can now only hope and pray for peace until fresh elections – both the upcoming parliamentary election and the expected presidential election after the promulgation of the new constitution – are held, if all goes well.

It's time the international community helped strengthen the genuine revolutionary forces to be an alternative to Islamism and autocracy. That's the only way to secure the future of not only the Christians, but also of the majority of Egyptians who have seen their friends and relatives die in the struggle to seek change.

Egypt: Salafis' Agenda behind Christian Persecution

June 13, 2011

A recent spate of violence in Egypt, mostly incited by conservative Salafi Muslims after President Hosni Mubarak's downfall, has left over 24 killed, more than 200 wounded and three churches destroyed. The perception of threat to the Christians is so severe that many of them are reportedly seeking to move out of the country.

While for the youth and moderate Muslims of this country the January 25 uprising was about democratic freedoms, the Salafis who had been inactive for decades promptly saw it as an opportunity to push an Islamist agenda.

Sectarian violence, mostly against Coptic Christians, escalated amid a debate on the role of religion in politics that began following the departure of Mubarak and picked up pace after the announcement of a referendum to adopt an interim constitution (mainly amendment to the 1971 constitution) paving the way for a democratic election. The bone of contention was Article 2 of the previous constitution which stated that Islam was the state religion and legislation must be based on the principles of Islamic law. This Article was retained in the draft constitution and insulated against the voting and yet there were apprehensions.

Islamists thought if Egyptians were to reject the draft constitution, a new one would have to be drawn up from scratch which might not include the content of Article 2. Liberal Egyptians, who see Islam mainly as a form of private faith, feared that the retention of the Article could lead to discrimination against Coptic Christians and other minorities – more than they experienced during Mubarak's regime.

In the March 19 referendum, a majority said 'yes' to the amendments and the interim constitution was adopted. However, the debate is not over yet. The Salafist struggle for the formation of a more conservative state carries on.

Salafis read the Quran literally and seek to maintain a lifestyle that replicates early Islam in the days of Mohammed. They follow the *salaf*, Muhammad's 7th century companions, and reject later movements as heresy. They believe in banning alcohol, the "mixing of sexes" and Christian worship. It is believed that they are being guided and funded by their counterparts in Saudi Arabia.

Before Mubarak's departure, Salafis would do little more than preaching and were known for dismissing democracy as un-Islamic – but they would not call for a revolt. But now, they have taken a U-turn. They seem to have concluded that it is easier to establish an Islamic state through elections. They have founded a political party, Al Nour, and backed the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most organised political group, during the March 19 referendum for the interim constitution.

In April, when Egypt's military establishment, now the new government, appointed a Christian as the new governor of the Qena Governorate to replace the previous official who was also a Christian, the Salafis raised a hue and cry saying a Christian could not be given

authority of Muslims. They demanded that a Muslim governor be appointed. In March, a Salafi leader, al-Hosseini Kamal, a suspected terrorist, had cut off the ear of a 45 year old Christian Coptic man, Ayman Anwar Mitri, in Qena. Kamal was one of the thousands of terror suspects who were released from detention after the revolution.

The provocations of the Salafis seem to be aimed at mobilising Egyptian Muslims. For that's the easiest and fastest way to gain support from conservative sections of the Muslim community.

The Salafis cannot be expected to do well in the parliamentary election expected in September, but its sectarian activities are helping other religious groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which claims to be a moderate Islamist party and promise equality to Coptic Christians, to garner support. The Salafi violence makes the Muslim Brotherhood appear more mainstream, more tolerant and a saner option to the voter at a time when other political groups are still struggling to organise themselves.

Salafi leaders have also said they would partner with the Muslim Brotherhood to field Islamist candidates for the election.

One of the reasons why Salafi violence is not being dealt with strictly is that it is helping the military leaders, who have been eyeing a larger financial aid from the United States in the wake of Mubarak's downfall. Any possibility of an Islamist party coming to power makes Washington nervous and therefore more generous towards to transitional government.

Giving in to pressure by the protesting Salafis, the military government on April 25 announced on national television that Qena's new (Christian) governor's appointment had been stayed for three months and the deputy governor, a Muslim, would temporarily act as the governor. This sent a wrong signal to the Salafis that they can arm-twist the government, which claims it can no longer curb any "public" rally lest it be seen as "authoritarian."

There are many other obstacles.

Egypt's media has been co-opted by the Salafis as they are being covered widely and their voices featured in news which further emboldens them. Some newspapers and news channels go to the extent of reporting on rumours which often result in violence.

Laws that help Islamists to incite violence also remain intact. Egyptian law makes it difficult for Christians to build places of worship while Muslims can construct theirs without much regulation. As a result, many new churches use their buildings officially meant for other purposes for worship which causes tensions. Also, the authorities use Article 98(f) of the Penal Code, the blasphemy law, to restrict evangelism efforts.

Besides, the Salafis are not an officially organised group without any provision for membership. Therefore, dealing with the movement is difficult, as only the individuals held responsible for an action can be prosecuted, which, too, happens rarely. Moreover, values such as secularism, justice and freedom are seen as "Western imperialism," and therefore difficult to promote. Furthermore, sectarian violence mostly takes place in regions where poverty prevails and where most people follow their religious leaders almost blindly – particularly in provincial towns in southern Egypt.

While there are always triggers of violence, the causes of the divide among sections of majority Muslims and minority Christians, who make up about 10 percent of Egypt's 80 million people, are rooted in history. Christianity in Egypt predates Islam but by the 10th century, the Christians were reduced to a minority. While the "Hamayouni Decree" brought some equality in 1856, discrimination against the Christians returned with the Nasser Revolution of 1952 and remained in place for decades.

Solutions to the problem of sectarianism should be sought keeping these complexities in mind.

First and foremost, the transitional government should be pushed to ensure institutional equality for the minorities. And Washington is currently best positioned to do so by linking its aid to sincere political and economic reforms and human rights and freedoms.

The Egyptian government must be asked to prevent the Salafis from receiving funding from abroad and enjoying impunity. And an effort should be made towards an institutional protection for Christians *before* the election. If it is left to the regime that comes following the election, which is likely to be dominated by Islamists, there will be little hope for equality.

The military rulers should also be urged to engage the country's elite – politicians, the intelligentsia, Islamists, and Coptic leaders – in discussions to address grievances and persuade them to refrain from any provocation. The government has made attempts earlier, but not wholeheartedly.

Let us help prevent conditions that can cause an exodus of Egypt's Christians.

Let's Protect, Listen to Syria's Christians

April 26, 2012

Extremist Islamist forces in Syria's opposition movement have attacked local Christians due to the notion that they back the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

The country's largest denomination, the Syrian Orthodox Church, recently highlighted "an ongoing ethnic cleansing of Christians" allegedly by members of an al-Qaida-linked militant Islamist group, Brigade Faruq, in the city of Homs, an opposition stronghold. Catholic news agency Fides reports that over 90 percent of Christians in Homs have fled to Jordan and their homes have been grabbed by the militants.

Christians elsewhere in Syria are not safe either, due to threats and incidence of targeted abductions, killings and bombings.

The perception that Christians are entirely pro-regime is simplistic. It's true that they are hesitant to back the opposition in its current composition, but their concerns are rooted in facts and are shared by other minorities.

It is estimated that about 10 percent of Syria's 23 million people are Christian, and another 10 percent of the population is from the Alawite sect, a Shiite offshoot. And another 10 percent, or more, are non-Arab ethnic Kurds, who are mostly Sunni Muslim but have their own language and culture, and are seen as secular and western-oriented. The rest, about 70 percent, are largely Sunni Muslims.

President al-Assad is an Alawite, and is supported by Iran as well as Lebanon's Hezbollah among other Shi'a groups. London's *Guardian* newspaper, which gained access to a cache of thousands of emails received and sent by al-Assad, recently revealed that the President received advice from Iran or its proxies on several occasions during the revolution.

The opposition movement, on the other hand, is aided by Saudi Arabia and dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and Arab nationalists. Especially the Free Syrian Army, a paramilitary composed of defected Syrian Armed Forces personnel and run by the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), has Saudi Salafi elements. Many Saudi mosques and clerics have also openly supported the rebels.

It's an exclusive opposition grouping. For example, the progressive minority of Kurds, which has been struggling to gain legal recognition and identity in Syria and neighboring countries in the face of Arabization, is kept on the margins of the movement. This is because the United States has reportedly asked its ally Turkey (the SNC is based in Istanbul) to strengthen the Syrian opposition. Turkey has repressed its own Kurdish minority and cannot be expected to support it in Syria.

The SNC is locally not seen as a native, homegrown campaign against al-Assad, and lacks a mass appeal, even among Sunni Muslim youth, in Aleppo and Damascus, the two major business and religious hubs of Syria.

There are progressive and liberal people in the opposition, but they have not been able to form their distinct identity as opposed to the extremist elements. For example, when al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in a video message posted on YouTube in February backed the rebels in Syria and called on the opposition not to rely on the Arab League or the West for help, there were no attempts to distance the opposition from extremism.

From the perspective of the Christians, the Kurds, the Alawites and even secular-minded Sunni Muslims, it makes more sense to seek stability within al-Assad's regime until and unless there is a viable and safe alternative. The minorities anticipate complete uncertainty and chaos after the ouster of the President, which could bring with it sectarian bloodbath and/or a dominant political force that will refuse to recognize minorities and their rights and protect them. Developments in Iraq and Egypt confirm their fears.

Father Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, the Metropolitan of Aleppo, recently told BBC that Christians want dialogue that will include "everybody who represents the opposition, not just those the government calls the opposition." Christians had genuine concerns, he said, as "we can't wish the Iraqi model for anyone and the Christians of the region also feel uneasy with what happened in Egypt recently... Our concerns are not related to who will come to power, we are afraid that whoever will come may close their eyes and ears, or will not like to deal with us... We don't fear the Islamists, we fear the violent extremists who will not accept the other."

Time is running out in Syria. The United Nations estimates that more than 9,000 people have been killed since the revolution started in the country in March 2011. And now, despite a UN-brokered ceasefire that was announced on April 12, violence and tensions continue with the al-Assad regime breaching the agreement. The increasing violence can compel the international community to go for intervention like in Libya or for arming of the opposition fighters.

However, before any of the two options are resorted to, it must be ensured that there is a unified, inclusive opposition with a clearly laid out agenda for political process that will follow to ensure freedom for and safety of all communities, including Christians and other minorities. Efforts are being made, but they need to be accelerated further in light of the crisis Syria is fast slipping into.

Iran's Assault on Religious Freedom May Worsen

December 30, 2011

Christians in Iran have faced a wave of arrests since the disputed presidential elections in June 2009. Persecution intensified as international pressure began to build over Iran's secret nuclear enrichment program leading to sanctions in the following months. And now, when the United States is likely to announce more sanctions, the going may get even tougher for minorities in this Shi'a-majority nation.

Authorities began to arrest Christians and members of other minorities following protests, known as the Green Revolution, over Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's claimed victory in the 2009 elections that were believed to be rigged. President Ahmadinejad, in power since 2005, curtailed civil liberties, brutally attacked protesters, arrested hundreds and executed a few. Persecution of minorities was part of Iran's attempt to tighten control over all aspects of people's lives in the face of domestic insecurity. Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who is facing death for apostasy, was also arrested from the city of Rasht in northern Gilan Province not too long after the protests.

Iran's leadership alleges that the West, particularly its chief enemy, the United States, wants to incite an Iranian civil war. In fact, authoritarianism in Iran dates back to the early 1950s when a coup d'état was perceived to be instigated by the U.K. and U.S. And it is believed that this perception of "foreign influence" culminated in the Iranian Revolution leading to the establishment of the Islamic republic in 1979.

The accusation that the United States is seeking to topple the government was also made during the Green Revolution. This is why U.S. President Barack Obama only called for restraint, opting for a low-key response lest Iran's political opposition lost its legitimacy with U.S. involvement. However, at the G20 summit in September 2009, Obama and leaders from Britain, France, and Germany accused Iran of building a secret uranium-enrichment facility near the holy city of Qom. U.S. sanctions followed in February 2010 against the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution for its involvement in missile and nuclear programs. Also known as Revolutionary Guards, it's a military wing tasked to protect the country's Islamic system.

In June 2010, UN Security Council led by the U.S. announced a fourth round of sanctions, placing new bans on Iranian investments, restricting sales of weapons, and imposing penalties on companies connected to Revolutionary Guards. Unilateral U.S. and European Union sanctions followed – at a time when Ahmadinejad was struggling to offset inflation. Again in September 2010, the U.S. imposed its first sanctions on Iran for human rights violations. Previous sanctions were mostly against Iran's nuclear enrichment and support for anti-Israel militant groups.

These sanctions, particularly by the UN, led to further restriction of civil rights in Iran, and many more Christians were arrested. Between July and December 2010, it is estimated that authorities arrested more than 160 Christians, and courts sentenced two pastors, including Nadarkhani, to death for apostasy.

The arrests in this country of 75 million people continue. Most recently, in the third week of December 2011, authorities in the southern town of Ahwaz raided an Assemblies of God-affiliated church and detained the entire congregation, including children attending Sunday school, according to the London-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

Persecution of religious minorities, including Sunni and Baha'i communities but particularly the country's roughly 300,000 Christians, may further intensify in 2012 given that Iran seeks to gain a greater control over political and civil aspects of people's lives to consolidate power at home whenever international pressure increases. The United States is currently readying economic sanctions to reduce Iran's oil revenue in a bid to deter it from pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

Iranian authorities seem to be reacting, as expected. Iranian Vice President Mohammad-Reza Rahimi has threatened to block oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz that is used to transport roughly 20 percent of the world's oil supply. This reaction once again indicates Iran's sense of insecurity which may lead to repression of civil rights.

Civil rights restrictions in Iran put religious minorities, which are demonized as "parasites," at a great risk because religion plays a central role in this country. The survival of the Islamic Republic is the top priority of Iran's elite as well as excuse for brutality. For Shi'a Iran – and not Sunni Saudi Arabia – is the closest example of an Islamic nation that world's conservative Muslims dream of. The only problem Sunnis have is that Iran is based on Shi'a faith.

The Twelver Shi'a branch of Islam is the official state religion in Iran. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance monitors all religious minorities. Christians are not allowed to carry out any activity outside church walls. Evangelism can lead to arrest and torture or even execution.

The constitution grants equal rights to all Iranians irrespective of ethnicity, color, or language – but not irrespective of religion. All basic freedoms are subject to Islamic principles – as the State interprets them. All non-Muslim Iranians are required to mention their religion on census forms. Non-Muslims cannot work in the government or commissions in the armed services. There is a provision for minority representation in the parliament, but the Christian quota is only for the Orthodox denomination, and not for Protestants or Roman Catholics. For admission in universities, all students must pass a test in Islamic theology.

Worse, a Muslim can kill a non-Muslim in Iran and get away with it by paying blood-money, which too can be waived off by courts, without any jail term. If a Muslim kills a Baha'i or an "apostate," authorities will not take any action, as if they were not human beings. And if a non-Muslim man has sexual relations with a Muslim woman, he faces death.

Seeking change in Iran has been extremely difficult for the international community. Tehran and Washington have had no relations for 30 years, and three decades of sanctions have not shown many results. Perhaps, Tehran has got used to sanctions

Besides, China and Russia still do business with Iran, a regional power that plays a crucial role in world economy due to its large reserves of petroleum and natural gas. Iran also plays a role in international politics as it controls Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Gaza-based Hamas, and competes with the U.S. in the Middle East. Since some key U.S. allies have fallen

as a result of the Arab Spring, Tehran now appears to have a greater sense of power against America as well as Saudi Arabia.

However, the fact that Iran reacts to sanctions and public condemnation by the West reveals that international pressure affects Tehran. Sanctions hinder economic growth and global rise, which are part of ambitions of most nations that base their nationalism on religion.

Sanctions should perhaps carry on but with simultaneous efforts by the United States towards dialogue and negotiations. It's true that we have not seen much change in Iran's nuclear enrichment and anti-Israel policies – which sanctions target the most. But seeking change in civil rights will perhaps be less challenging.

The people of Iran, once they are allowed to exercise their civil rights, will be best positioned to influence their government and bring about change. We need to urge the United States and other international players to value religious and other civil freedoms as much as deterrence of nuclear weapons.

Why US Must Save Lives of Iraq's Christians, Other Minorities

“The world hasn’t seen an evil like this for a generation.” This is how the national spokesman for Iraqi Christians in the United States described atrocities by Isis terrorists in northern Iraq, which include beheading of children and their mothers and fathers, and forcing almost all Christians in the region to flee. While the United States has resumed military action to deal with the crisis in Iraq, its commitment reflects half-heartedness and fails to match the enormity of suffering and potential threats.

“They are systematically beheading children, and mothers and fathers ... There’s actually a park in Mosul that they’ve actually beheaded children and put their heads on a stick,” Mark Arabo, the spokesman for Iraqi Christians, told CNN. “This is crimes against humanity. The whole world should come together. This is much broader than a community or faith ... They are doing the most horrendous, the most heart-breaking things you can think of.”

The Episcopal Vicar of Iraq, Canon Andrew White, recently visited the town of Qaraqosh, which like many other towns and cities has been captured by the Isis, to assess the situation. “The majority of the town’s 50,000 people have fled, fearing that, like other Christians in this region, they will be massacred. The militants, in a further act of sacrilege, have established their administrative posts in the abandoned churches,” he said, according to Catholic Online.

Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako of Baghdad has called for “international support and a professional, well-equipped army,” saying the situation is “going from bad to worse.”

U.S. President Barack Obama’s announcement last week about the American military involvement in Iraq acknowledged the suffering of minorities. “These terrorists have been especially barbaric toward religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis,” Obama said, but while carefully underlining the humanitarian nature of the intervention. He said it was meant only to prevent the likely advancement of Isis terrorists toward the U.S. embassy in Baghdad or the U.S. consulate in Arbil, and to help save Iraqi civilians stranded in the Mount Sinjar region.

Obama referred to the more than 50,000 people from the Yazidi ethnic minority, who like Christians were forced to flee their villages and are now trapped on the Sinjar mountains with Isis men surrounding them. The subtext of his statement was a promise only of a short-term, limited involvement.

It is, of course, a moral obligation of Washington not to leave Iraq in the lurch after its 2003 invasion and subsequent pull-out of its forces. But in fulfilment of this moral obligation also lie America’s interests.

The U.S. took on al-Qaeda and its former leader Osama bin Laden, but now its offshoot, the Isis, which is also known as the Islamic State, has emerged as far more brutal and powerful – and therefore a likely threat to America in the days to come.

“This is a strategic development, not a tactical development, because this is a group that has lots of money and lots of arms and an image of success they are trading on right now,” former U.S. Ambassador Dennis Ross recently told Defense One. “Ultimately what they want to do is show how they are able to take us on. And so we will be drawn into this more and more inevitably because we will have to interrupt their ability to plan and operate lest they become a threat to us.”

The agenda of Isis is to create a caliphate in the Middle East and beyond. The group has already established control of an adjoining territory comprising much of north-western Iraq and eastern Syria, declaring it a caliphate. Jordan, Lebanon and other nations might be its targets in the near future, causing a strategic havoc for the United States.

Isis, a Sunni group that was earlier known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, has recruited thousands of fighters having European and U.S. passports, as well as people from the Arab world and the Caucasus. And it initially raised money through rich people in the Arab Gulf States of Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are all U.S. allies, as Daily Beast journalist Josh Rogin recently wrote.

“Everybody knows the money is going through Kuwait and that it’s coming from the Arab Gulf,” Rogin quoted Andrew Tabler, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Studies, as saying. “Kuwait’s banking system and its money changers have long been a huge problem because they are a major conduit for money to extremist groups in Syria and now Iraq.”

It’s not difficult to foresee foreign Isis fighters returning “home” and threatening the security of some Western nations, including the U.S., from within.

Moreover, Isis is eyeing a region that is vital to global energy resources.

More than any other foreign power, the United States knows that the Iraqi government and its military do not have the capability to defeat Isis. Iraq is afflicted with political divisions and crisis along with social divisions along religious and ethnic lines.

When Isis first captured the city of Fallujah in the Iraqi province of Al Anbar, about 40 miles west of Baghdad, earlier this year, Washington chose to ignore the threat or was oblivious.

“We had a real opportunity when Fallujah fell,” former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey recently said. “We didn’t know how bad the Iraqi army really was, but we knew they weren’t very good. The administration had the warning and it didn’t act and that is really a tragedy.”

President Obama perhaps has two worries about another long-term involvement in Iraq. One, the possibility of the United States weakening the integrity of Iraq by giving weapons to the Kurdish army, which is seeking independence from Iraq. This is especially a concern because the break-up of the Shia-majority nation can be an advantage to Iran, one of the major

enemies of America. Two, a weakened Isis could mean strengthening of the regime of Syria's embattled President Bashar al-Assad, who is also from a Shiite sect.

However, Kurdish independence is fast gaining acceptance internationally. Besides, strengthening of the Syrian regime is unarguably a lesser evil than the strengthening of Isis in Syria.

Obama's insistence on no American boots on the ground in Iraq is understandable. But widening the scope of the U.S. intervention without American troops on the ground could be an option. In other words, the United States must do whatever it takes – within the consensus of the international community – to deal with the growing threat of Isis. At stake are international security and the human cost of Isis terrorism, global energy needs and the lives of hundreds of thousands of members of religious minorities, including Christians.

Extinction of Iraq's Christians must be Prevented

March 12, 2011

Under constant Islamist attacks, over half of Iraq's Christian community has fled the country and thousands of others are seeking shelter away from their hometowns. Yet Iraqi authorities remain reluctant to act and it is feared that the remaining Christians may also soon have to leave the restive country. This needs to be averted before it's too late.

Iraq's Christians, one of the oldest communities in the world, have faced numerous incidents of bomb explosions, killings, abduction, torture, and forcible conversion to Islam ever since the U.S.-led liberation war began in 2003 – local Christians are seen as allies of the US forces. It is estimated – by conservative standards – that between 400,000 and 600,000 Christians have left the country. Some put the number at one million.

In the past, Christians in the troubled areas, such as the cities of Baghdad and Mosul, had an option to flee to nearby Christian-majority pockets in the autonomous Kurdistan area and cities under the occupation of Kurdish forces, which until recently were not seen as hostile to the Christians. But, of late, even Kurds have begun to persecute them. Perhaps, there are no "havens" left for the Christians.

A recent wave of attacks began in Mosul killing at least 10 Christians in the run up to the March 2010 parliamentary election, which prompted over 4,300 Christians to flee to the Nineveh Plains area. On Apr. 3, 2010, British daily *The Telegraph* reported that many Christians in Mosul were being stopped on the street and asked for their identity cards – and shot if their names revealed their Christian origins. The exodus surged manifold after a major attack at Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad on Oct. 31 last year which killed 44 worshippers and three priests.

The attackers of the Oct. 31 attack were from the Islamist terror group Islamic State of Iraq – Al Qaeda's name in Iraq. They had demanded the release of two Christian women held captive in Egyptian Coptic monasteries for their conversion to Islam – a rumor supposedly spread by a Libyan Islamist from Al Qaeda, Sheikh Abu Yehya, according to Washington DC-based Hudson Institute.

In the following weeks, hundreds of Christians fled. For example, only one Christian family remained – down from 70 families in 2003 – in Habbaniya Cece town in Anbar Province, now an Al Qaeda stronghold and where an ancient church was bombed in 2005, *The New York Times* reported on Jan. 20, 2011.

Christians are still fleeing the country, as those displaced by the 2010 attacks are being harassed and have lost the confidence in the government's ability to protect their lives. While some displaced Christians have returned to their cities, having no money left to survive away from their hometowns, they are constantly haunted by the possibility of another wave of attacks any time, any day. Hospitals, universities and other essential facilities are far away from Christian hamlets and they find travelling too risky.

On Feb. 1, 2011, Geneva-based International Organization for Migration (IOM) said a persistent feeling of insecurity was driving more Christians from their homes. IOM counted over 1,300 Christian families seeking refuge in northern Iraq, which is largely under the control of Kurdish people. It also found some real estate agents spreading rumors of attacks to drop property prices and to force Christians to sell their homes. In some areas with high numbers of displaced Christians, rents have risen by 200 to 300 percent.

The Nineveh Plains, a region technically under the government of Ninawa province, northwest of Mosul and where many displaced Christians found shelter, is under the occupation of Kurdish militias shielded by the Kurdish Democratic Party that governs Iraq's Kurdistan region. The Kurdish forces, believed to be close to the US military, are also persecuting the Christians.

Iraq's Kurdish leaders, along with the Shi'a political leadership, dominated the drafting of the country's constitution. They made provisions for the near total autonomy of the Kurdistan Regional Government and a referendum to decide if adjoining disputed territories will become part of the autonomous region. However, the federal government, now dominated by the Shi'as, is delaying the referendum which has angered the Kurds. The ensuing tensions have caused the Kurds to not only overprotect their region but also to make an attempt to establish their control over disputed territories. In the process, they have begun to attack minorities, including the Christians.

Kurdish militias entered Christian hamlets soon after the US operations began in 2003. They claimed they wanted to protect the Christians and other minorities from attacks by the Arabs. However, as the years went by, they themselves began to harass the minority. Before the March 2010 election, Kurdish security forces threatened Christian residents saying they must vote for the Kurdish candidates or face consequences. Kurdish forces have also erected "security" barriers in Christian areas to restrict their movements, making life difficult for them. Local residents believe Kurdish forces have killed and abducted many Christians, reported Assyrian International News Agency, known as AINA, on Feb. 18, 2011.

Around 75 percent of the Iraqi population is Arab, and roughly 15 percent is Kurd. Over 95 percent of all Iraqis are Muslim – 65 percent Shi'a and 35 percent Sunni. Iraq's politics had largely been dominated by the Arab Sunnis until the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003. Now, the federal government of Iraq is governed by Shi'ite parties led by the Islamic Dawa Party.

Apart from being targeted for their faith by Al Qaeda and related terror groups, Iraq's Christians are also caught in the crossfire of the Arab-Kurd and Shi'a-Sunni conflicts, which rose to new heights after the 2003 US operations.

So how can the remaining Christians be protected amid such complexities?

First and foremost, the US Forces in Iraq and the Kurdish leadership could be lobbied, given that large numbers of Christians live in the areas that are under the influence of the Kurds, who are seen as allies of the United States. They must be urged to ensure the protection of the Christian residents as well the displaced Christians from the Kurdish militias. They should also be asked to provide their day-to-day needs and long-term needs such as education. Two

key persons who could be lobbied are General Lloyd J. Austin III, Commanding General of US Forces in Iraq, and Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish regional government.

Then, the Christians, who have fled to the neighboring nations, including Syria and Jordan, should be identified and their rights ensured as other refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other relief agencies should be apprised of the situation.

Besides, many Christian politicians in the Nineveh Plains are calling for the creation of an autonomous province for Christians as the only hope for their safety. This demand should be evaluated and highlighted in the global mainstream media, which have not covered the plights of Iraqi Christians sufficiently. Moreover, the US must seek a comprehensive settlement between the Kurdistan regional government and the federal government with the help of the UN to ease tensions in the region.

Furthermore, the United States should be asked to streamline its Iraq policy to deal with the failure of the federal and Kurdistan governments to protect Christians and other minorities, and to ensure enactment of special laws to prevent impunity after incidents of religiously motivated violence.

As a long-term goal, Iraq's secular parties – parties that will treat all religious communities equally – should be strengthened, as they seem far weaker than the Islamists parties which use mosques and other influential religious organizations to mobilize support and financial resources.

Lebanon's Sectarianism Recipe for Religious Freedom Disaster

The protracted presidential vacuum in Lebanon reveals how sectarian politics has turned as a result of the conflict in neighboring Syria, and should serve as a warning for those who care for stability and religious freedom in this Middle Eastern nation.

Lebanon's parliament has not been able to reach consensus on the election of the president despite 20 attempts over the last 10 months, which has paralyzed lawmaking and crippled the government's work at a time when the country has around 1.18 million registered Syrian refugees, mostly Sunni, and sectarian violence is growing.

Lebanon's politics is highly polarized.

While the Sunni Muslims-led March 14 Alliance is known for its anti-Syrian regime stance and strong ties to the United States, the Shiite Hezbollah-led March 8 Alliance is seen as pro-Syrian regime. The former blames the March 8 Alliance, calling it a proxy of Iran, for the political crisis in Lebanon by obstructing the presidential vote with their consistent boycott of parliament sessions.

Syria's embattled President Bashar al-Assad is from the Alawite minority, which is an offshoot of Shia Islam. And those fighting against his regime are mostly Sunni Muslims.

Some in the March 14 Alliance believe that unless a president fully supportive of Iran is elected, the March 8 Alliance won't allow the election to be held successfully. Others say Iran wants to pressure the West to finalize a proposed nuclear deal with Tehran before allowing the presidential election to be held in Lebanon.

The Syrian conflict has also spilled over into Lebanon's society. Hundreds have died and thousands injured in numerous incidents of sectarian violence in Tripoli and Beirut as well as northern, southern and eastern parts of Lebanon since mid-2011.

Sectarianism is also reflected in the Lebanese press. Nearly all media outlets have ties to sectarian leaders or groups, and consequently practice self-censorship and maintain a specific, often partisan, editorial line, according to Freedom House.

Of Lebanon's estimated 4.1 million people, about 60 percent are Muslim – roughly equally divided between Sunni and Shia – and 39 percent are Christian.

Religious identity is pronounced among the people of Lebanon. Religion is generally written on national identity cards as well as a few other official documents.

The constitution provides for political offices to be in accordance with religious affiliations. For example, it states that Christians and Muslims be represented equally in parliament, the cabinet and high-level civil service positions.

Besides, an unwritten National Pact of 1943 requires that Lebanon's president must come from the local traditional Maronite Christian community, the largest Christian denomination in the country. However, the 1989 Taif Agreement, which ratified the end of the country's 15-year civil war of 1975 to 1990, reduced the power of the Maronite Christian presidency.

The multifaceted Lebanese Civil War resulted in an estimated 120,000 deaths and mass exodus, and tens of thousands remain displaced even today.

The National Pact also states that the speaker of the parliament must be a Shiite Muslim, its prime minister Sunni Muslim, and the deputy speaker and the deputy prime minister Greek Orthodox.

Moreover, law offers potential tools to sectarian elements, be they in the government or society, to persecute communities. For example, the penal code provides for one-year imprisonment for "blaspheming God publicly." The law also allows for censorship of material that may incite sectarian discord or be deemed a threat to national security.

Evangelism is not punishable by law, but religious leaders and communities strongly oppose it, sometimes with the threat of violence.

The Syrian conflict and its repercussions in Lebanon, the diverse demography, the civil war legacy and political instability are enough ingredients to reignite major tensions.

To prevent renewed conflict in Lebanon, it is urgent for international organizations and foreign players to ensure at the earliest mitigation of the spillover effects of the conflict in Syria, national stability and reduction of sectarian tensions.

The way forward could be to help improve humanitarian access into Syria so that the influx of refugees is checked, to provide development assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon as well as to the Lebanese citizens who are hosting and helping the refugees, to help strengthen Lebanese armed forces while ensuring they don't turn sectarian, and to reduce violence in Syria by a dialogue that includes all regional players that have stakes in the Syrian conflict.

Saving Christians from Islamic State in the Middle East

July 3, 2015

Christians are one of the primary civilian targets of the Islamic State terror group, which has threatened to eradicate minorities from within the territories it controls and beyond, even as the Christian population in the Middle East has been on a steep decline.

Most recently, Islamic State, which is also known as ISIS or ISIL, vowed to slaughter Christian Arabs in Jerusalem, saying its militants will “clean this country and the Muslim Quarter from these Christians during this holy Ramadan.” Although the Sunni terror group doesn’t have a known official branch in Israel, the threat issued points to its agenda, ambition and targets.

In June, ISIS kidnapped 88 Eritrean Christians in Libya. In May, ISIS captured Ethiopian Christians and executed them, three months after it beheaded 21 Egyptian Copts.

Christians in the Middle East accounted for about 20 percent at the start of the 20th century, and their number has reduced to about 5 percent. And many of those who remain are now facing the jihadists’ “convert-or-die” policy, especially in Iraq and Syria.

Syria had about 1.1 million Christians before 2011, and more than 700,000 of them have fled the country due to attacks by ISIS and other groups. Iraq had over 1 million Christians prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion, and now their number has come down to less than 200,000. And most of them have fled to regions in the north under Kurdish control, which, too, is now facing a serious threat from ISIS as it has captured Mosul.

Last week, the U.S.-based think tank Council on Foreign Relations invited experts to discuss “The Future of Religious Pluralism in the Middle East.” One of the questions they explored was whether minorities, including Christians, are on the brink of extinction in some parts of the region.

It is “certainly within the realm of possibility,” said panelist Andrew Doran, Special Advisor at the U.S.-based In Defense of Christians group.

The possible fall of Damascus, he explained, giving an example, would lead to mass migrations, that of the Druze to southwestern Syria, of the Alawites and Shiites to northwest Syria, and of Christians to Lebanon. “And there would be mass slaughter along the way if this were to happen, because if Damascus would fall, you could reasonably foresee that Aleppo and Hama would fall, and Lebanon would become suddenly very vulnerable.”

He went on to state, “It is entirely possible that the very worst for Middle East Christianity lay ahead... in the foreseeable future.”

The other two panelists – Faith McDonnell, Director of the Religious Liberty Program, Institute on Religion and Democracy, and David Saperstein, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State – agreed with Doran.

The safety of Christians is closely linked to the ongoing geopolitical power struggle between Sunni Muslims and Iran-backed Shias in the region, which created space for ISIS to establish its alleged Caliphate in western Iraq and eastern Syria. And thanks to ISIS propaganda and false portrayal of power, many terror groups from Africa to South Asia have professed allegiance to it.

ISIS, which was founded in 2006 as an al-Qaeda offshoot, identifies with jihadi-Salafism, a regressive movement in Islamic political thought that is supported by many around the world. Its leaders are known for having anti-Shiite views and for advocating strict application of Islamic law.

In its English propaganda magazine “Dabiq,” ISIS recently sought to give religious basis for its barbarity, saying it is “Islamic” to capture and forcibly make “infidel” women sexual slaves.

“Before Shaytan [Satan] reveals his doubts to the weak-minded and weak hearted, one should remember that enslaving the families of the kuffar [infidels] and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Shari’ah that if one were to deny or mock, he would be denying or mocking the verses of the Qur’an and the narration of the Prophet ... and thereby apostatizing from Islam,” an article in the magazine said.

While the United States claims it is seeking to “degrade and destroy” ISIS, hardly any expert believes it is possible in the near future, given Washington’s extremely cautious policy towards the terror group in Iraq and Syria.

It is, therefore, difficult to say whether ISIS would cease to be a threat to Christians and others in the near future. And opinions are divided over how to save the endangered Christian minority from its attacks.

Some believe that the Christian presence needs to be preserved in the region that is known as Christianity’s cradle, while others say Christians’ safety should be the top priority in any strategy to deal with the ISIS threat.

In a recent article, Nina Shea, director of U.S.-based Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom, wrote: “The only achievable strategy under the current circumstances is to prepare for an orderly resettlement of these Christians (and Yazidis) in the West. It is a bitter development for the Church and for them, being discarded after 2,000 years of history, through no fault of their own. But it is the most humane of the alternatives. Otherwise they face indigence and exile or, worse, slaughter at the hands of jihadists.”

Either way, the international community needs to deal with some urgent needs. For example, the displaced Christians must be protected from further attacks and supported with basic

needs, and a system should be in place to help them recover their property that they left behind if and when they are able to return to their areas. There is also a need to foster hope for inclusive governance wherever there are civilian governments.

Christians in the region have expectations from the international Christian community. As Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Sako of Baghdad recently said, “We feel forgotten and isolated. We sometimes wonder, if they kill us all, what would be the reaction of Christians in the West? Would they do something then?”

Let’s hope, pray and make our best efforts so that Christians in the Middle East would not feel forgotten in their most difficult time.

Efforts on to Weaken Hope in Muslim World

November 12, 2010

Islamic countries have opposed reforms under the garb of fighting “Islamophobia” for over a decade. They have overseen the passage of numerous resolutions against “defamation of religions” at the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council since 1999 seeking legitimacy for and promoting restriction of the freedom of speech in nations. This month, they are putting forward another such resolution for voting at the General Assembly which can have serious ramifications for the freedom of expression and religion especially in the Muslim world.

A group of 57 states with large Islamic populations, known as the Organization of the Islamic Conference, has introduced resolutions condemning defamation of religions at the UN every year. These declarations – which allege a systematic attack on Islam after the 9/11 attacks in the US – urge governments around the world to enact special laws to ban any speech that would insult, criticize or offend any person’s religion, particularly Islam. Though non-binding thus far, these resolutions are gradually empowering Islamic governments to oppose the growing demand for democracy and associated rights by their people besides paving the way for a legally binding international ban on criticism of religion.

Most governments of these Islamic nations seem to be caught between a growing popular demand for political reforms and an increasing resistance to the Western-style democracy by hardline Muslim groups, both non-violent and violent. In other words, movements for and against democracy are visible in the Muslim world. However, the Saudi Arabia-based-and-dominated Islamic Conference – which projects itself as a central authority for the entire Islamic community, the Muslim *Ummah* – is snubbing progressive Muslims and siding with the hardliners.

Recent elections and developments in many Muslim-majority countries, especially in Asia, indicate that the people are seeking moderation and tolerance in their societies – a glimmer of hope – but at the same time extremist groups are also mounting pressure on the governments to remain socially and religiously conservative. This can be seen in Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Afghanistan and Indonesia among other nations.

The people of Pakistan voted against Nawaz Sharif’s right-wing Muslim League party in the 2008 general elections, and supported the centrist Pakistan People’s Party led by Asif Ali Zardari, who is now the President. One of the pledges Zardari had made during the elections was to repeal the blasphemy law. Zardari seems fairly moderate in his religious views, but at the UN, his government not only votes in favour of but also initiates resolutions meant to promote blasphemy laws. This is understandable because Saudi Arabia’s backing is crucial for Islamabad which has to face its enemy India, its giant neighbour.

Zardari is also helpless before the right-leaning military of Pakistan and the intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence, or the ISI, which are visibly Islamists and more powerful than the civilian government. Given the weakness of the government, persecution of Shi’a and Ahmadi minorities as well as that of Christians and Hindus has increased in the recent years.

And what has fuelled the harassment of these minorities is the country's blasphemy law (Section 295 and 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code).

Over 10 accused under this law have been murdered before the completion of their trial. On November 7, a Pakistani court sentenced to death a young Christian woman, Asia Bibi, in Punjab province for alleged blasphemy. Also, last July, at least nine Christians were killed and over 45 houses were burned in a Christian hamlet in Korian village of Gojra town in central Punjab over a rumour that some pages of the Quran were burnt. The attackers, masked and carrying sophisticated guns, were believed to be from an Islamist militant outfit, the Sipah-e-Sahaba, linked to the Afghan Taliban. Its offshoot, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, is believed to be the al-Qaeda's front in Pakistan.

In Bangladesh, an alliance led by Sheikh Hasina's leftist Awami League party won 263 of the 300 contested seats in parliament in the 2008 general elections. The Islamist Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami party (an ally of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party) won only two seats, which shows a lack of popular support to Islamist extremism in the country.

Also, on June 29, 2010, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh scrapped the 1979 Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, which allowed formation of religious political parties and legitimised military rule. However, Hasina, seemingly under pressure and to play a safe game, may not fully implement the court's ruling which can potentially ban Islamist parties.

In 2008, the Maldives (the only nation after Saudi Arabia that claims a 100-percent Muslim population) became a presidential democracy with moderate Muslim and democracy activist Mohamed Nasheed as the new President. Multi-party democracy came after 30 years of dictatorial rule by conservative President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Nasheed's party, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) is seen as a relatively liberal Muslim party. However, Gayoom's conservative Dhivehi Raiyyathunge Party has a simple majority in the 77-member People's Majlis (Maldives' unicameral Parliament) and opposes the largely liberal policies of Nasheed's government. Even the Muslim brotherhood party of the Maldives, the Adhaalath Party – an ally of the ruling MDP – opposes reforms in the Muslim society that Nasheed wants to bring in.

In Afghanistan, which was ruled by the radical Islamist Taliban regime from 1996 until the US military operation in 2001, President Hamid Karzai has emphasised the importance of human rights, especially for women, and remains the head of the government for over eight years. While the Taliban seem to have gained control over most parts of the country outside Kabul, they do not represent the people of Afghanistan who are generally moderate. However, "moderate" Karzai has not been able to amend the Afghan Press Laws that prohibit criticism of Islam and a law that makes apostasy a crime punishable by death.

In August 2010, the Taliban killed eight foreign medical workers in a remote northeast region. The killing came soon after a video telecast of underground Christian prayer meetings on Afghanistan's Noorin TV. The names and faces of Afghan Christian converts were also shown which sparked riots and demonstrations throughout the country. Under pressure from extremist groups, Karzai promised strict action against underground Christian activities. A member of parliament called for Afghan Christians to be executed, publicly. The Karzai government banned some Christian aid agencies on accusations of missionary activities.

A similar trend can be seen in Indonesia – home to the world’s largest Muslim population. This Southeast Asian nation is built on *Pancasila*, five principles: belief in the one and only God; just and civilized humanity; the unity of Indonesia; democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representatives; and social justice for the all of the people. However, attacks on Christians and forced closure of churches are increasing thanks to the growth of extremist groups such as the Islamic People’s Forum and the Islamic Defenders Front. While some local officials have been found to be colluding with extremist groups, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is known as a fairly progressive politician. But he remains weak and hasn’t been able to control the growing Islamist vigilante violence.

Even as large sections of Muslims are striving to bring change in their nations, the UN resolutions led by the Islamic Conference give more teeth to the State for religious repression and even greater political and social control, undermining those who want to promote democracy and tolerance. Since there is no one, acceptable-by-all definition of defamation of religions, the inevitable ambiguity can be exploited by Islamic regimes to resist even legitimate, democratic political opposition.

There is little room for doubt that the forces that are pushing the issue of defamation of religions at the UN actually want to resist demands by the modern world as well as by its own people and minorities for democracy and rights, including religious freedom. Also visible is their agenda against Muslim minorities, converts and reformers – the three entities Islamist groups and regimes hate the most.

However, as rights groups are lobbying UN member states, the support for the resolutions is constantly declining. Therefore, more non-Islamic Conference nations need to be briefed about the real intent behind these motions and the possible outcomes of their passage. Only then will it be possible to defeat the declarations each time they come up for voting.

This should be done urgently because the resolutions on defamation of religions also seek to export blasphemy laws to other countries, including in the West. While religious freedom is seen as belonging to an individual in the developed world, these decrees want religion itself to have rights – violating the very basis on which human rights stand.

The Key to Securing Religious Freedom in Post-Arab Spring Nations

December 1, 2011

Since a series of protests and demonstrations began across the Middle East and North Africa in December 2010, three regimes have fallen: that of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and ruler Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

Besides, President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen has finally agreed to step down after delaying it for months following his initial announcement to do so in April that he would resign in 30 days in exchange for immunity. Syria, under the state of emergency since 1963, appears to be on the brink of a civil war and change may follow sooner or later. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki have both announced that they would not seek re-election when their respective terms end.

The wave of revolutions has achieved what was almost unimaginable until recently, but it has come at the cost of tens of thousands of human lives. About 30,000 people were killed in Libya, around 4,000 in Syria, roughly 1,800 in Yemen, at least 875 in Egypt, and over 233 in Tunisia, according to estimates.

Now a big question hangs over these countries – especially Tunisia, Egypt and Libya that have overthrown their authoritarian regimes, and Yemen and Syria which are expected to follow suit – whether the new elected governments, most likely dominated by “moderate” Islamists, will grant religious freedom to minorities or will they move towards repression?

The Freedom and Justice Party (the Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt and the Ennahda party in Tunisia are poised to form governments that would draw up their respective constitutions. In Libya, Transitional Council Chairman Mustapha Abdul Jalil has said that the country will be ruled by Sharia law and the Muslim Brotherhood organized its first public meeting in Benghazi in November. In Syria, there are serious concerns over the fate of the Christians if and when President Bashar Al Assad falls leading to the re-emergence of the conservative Sunni leadership. In Yemen, a two-year transition period is expected to follow in which a national unity government will amend the constitution.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Libya and other influential Islamist groups like Ennahda in Tunisia have assured secularists, minorities and the international community that they will provide for equal rights of minorities. For example, Ennahda’s chief Rashid Ghannouchi told The Washington Post recently that “religion is not in contradiction with democracy and not in contradiction with human rights and justice.”

It is cautiously hoped that the Islamists will keep their promise. One of the reasons for hope is that the Islamists have not been able to win an absolute majority in the elections in Tunisia and Egypt thus far – and this trend may follow in Libya and elsewhere too – and they will have coalition governments with secular allies.

However, uncertainty and anxieties will remain among minorities. It is well known that the Islamist philosophy calls for the implementation of Islamic Sharia law and the establishment of an Islamic state, and that most Islamists reject democracy as a Western concept – after all,

it is with such ideals that recruitment is fuelled, international affiliations are established, and funds are raised.

For example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt issued a detailed political platform in October 2007, calling for Muslim clerics to watch over the government and saying that only a Muslim man should be eligible for the president's office. The Freedom and Justice Party also rejects the candidacy of Coptic Christians for the presidency. It is difficult to believe that the revolutions have caused an ideological change among the Islamists. There is perhaps only a shift in the strategy.

It is not unlikely that the Islamists see democracy as a means to attain power, and once secure in office they may gradually begin to implement the ideology they are known for. For example, in Nepal, Maoists privately concede that their priority during the country's transition from the world's only Hindu kingdom to a democracy is gaining power, and policy issues will be dealt with at a later stage.

So the uncertainty that looms over the post-revolution countries should not be left to time alone. The litmus test to determine the intent of the Islamists is not far away. The first test will be the provisions the assemblies under their leadership propose in the new constitutions to be drafted. And that's the key for the international community to ensure religious freedom.

The permanence of constitutional provisions cannot be overemphasized. Take for example, Indonesia. The Pancasila – the five principles on which the state was established in 1945 – has guarded the country from a nationwide Sharia law, thanks to one man's foresight. The second draft of the Pancasila, known as the Jakarta Charter, carried a provision for the "obligation for all followers to observe Sharia law." But a national leader, Mohammad Hatta, removed it at the last minute based on a request by a Christian representative, Alexander Andries Maramis. Until today, extremist groups in Indonesia are fighting for the inclusion of that provision.

It is extremely important for the international community to monitor the drafting of the constitutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere, as well as propose and lobby for full religious freedom and safeguards against any loopholes that could be used at a later stage to introduce restrictions on the rights of minorities and other citizens.

It's an overwhelming reality that the foundation of the ideological direction of several countries will be laid in the coming months. We must rise up to the occasion.

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Pakistan's Taliban Approach is Risky for Christians

November 27, 2013

The killing of over 85 people and the wounding of 150 others in a suicide bombing at a church in Peshawar two months ago has brought no change in the Pakistani government's approach to dealing with Islamist terrorists. Instead of taking strong action, the government continues to surrender to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) while appearing weak and timid.

The attack at All Saints Church in Peshawar on Sept. 22 was the first major targeting of a non-Muslim minority by the TTP, which acts as an umbrella organization of numerous smaller terror outfits in the country. Until the church bombing, the Taliban would launch targeted attacks only on Shia or Ahmaddiya people, state officials and at times high-profile Christian individuals.

Most terror strikes are about messaging, and the message sent out by the TTP through the church bombing was perceptible. One, it was seemingly an assertion of confidence by demonstrating the expansion of the target, which was foreseeable given the Islamist terror network's belief in creating a homogenous society where only their version of Islam is practised. Two, the attack was perhaps aimed at making the government desperate to negotiate peace with the Taliban with little or no bargaining power. After all, a terror attack on Christians gets more international attention than assaults on Muslim minorities, and thereby causes a greater concern in the local government.

The TTP has demanded that the government release detained terrorists, withdraw troops from the tribal areas and force the United States to stop drone attacks before negotiations begin. And the government appears to be continually giving in, showing clearly that it is afraid to take on the terror group. "So fearful is the government that it has put on hold the execution of three convicted militants including the mastermind of the 2009 GHQ [Pakistan Army Headquarters in Rawalpindi] attack after threats from the Taliban," said a recent article in Pakistan's *Dawn* newspaper.

This week, Member of Parliament Raja Zafar ul Haq, who is the chairman of the governing party, told the BBC that the government will not criticize the Pakistan Taliban. "We don't want to spoil the atmosphere, that would be counter-productive," he said, adding, "I don't want to say anything against them which hurts their feelings."

Former leader of the Pakistan Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud, who was killed in a drone strike [by the United States, and not Pakistani forces] on Nov. 1, was purported to be interested in striking a deal with the government. But the outfit's new head, Mullah Fazlullah, has categorically rejected calls for peace talks. But the government apparently wants to woo him,

although Fazlullah's men were believed to be behind the attack on 16-year-old education activist Malala Yousafzai.

Few have believed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's claim of "foreign hand" in the church bombing. The Taliban has denied, and at the same time admitted, its role. "We didn't carry out the church attack. However, we believe it's according to the Sharia," TTP spokesperson Shahidullah Shahid told BBC last month, and added that the group has many factions, all working towards the same goals.

Naturally, "a culture of fear grips the nation as the state has abdicated all responsibility, leaving the people at the mercy of the terrorists," add the *Dawn* article. "It gives the people little faith when their political leaders surrender to the militant narrative."

In its editorial the day after the church attack, *Dawn* noted that the hatred and bigotry embedded in the extremist ideology is not just about foreigners, but also about the majority of Pakistanis themselves. "Be it Shias, Ismailis, Barelvīs, non-Muslims or anyone else deemed to be outside the pale of radical Islam as practised by the militants and terrorists, everyone is a target," it said.

Until the political leadership of Pakistan acknowledges that the ideology of the TTP leaves no room for negotiations, "there can be no real understanding of why Pakistan has been so wracked by violence," the newspaper added. "And without that understanding, there cannot begin to be a solution."

While the TTP has communicated that it has a new target, i.e. Christians, the government has not made any effort to deter the group from that position. This can prove to be dangerous for the minority in the coming months and years.

The relations between Pakistan and the United States are far from cordial despite cooperation by the former in the latter's war against terror, but Washington must not overlook the suffering of Pakistan's minorities and liberal Muslim sections. If the United States can negotiate its way in continuing drone attacks despite pressure from powerful sections in Pakistan, it cannot excuse itself for not convincing Islamabad to deal strictly with the Taliban. If there's a will, there's a way.

Saving Pakistan's Christians

March 30, 2011

Pakistan is rightly in the spotlight of Christian rights groups after last month's assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian and Minister of Minority Affairs, for his efforts to repeal the notorious blasphemy law. Despite severe criticism by the international community that followed, nothing has changed. Attacks on the Christian and other minorities continue, the latest being this week's killing of two Christian men in Hyderabad.

The government of Pakistan is a strategic ally of the United States in the Operation Enduring Freedom in neighbouring Afghanistan, an integral part of the war against terror. But large numbers of Pakistani Muslim clerics and powerful sections of the military and the intelligence wing Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have had the ambition of seeking a key role in the affairs of the Muslim world.

Pakistan's founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah had a vision of stability, law and order and protection of all religious communities when the nation was formed in 1947. But the sixth president General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, who captured power by a coup in 1977, Islamized the country. Anti-blasphemy clauses were added to the Pakistan Penal Code under his regime. And the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the resultant growth of the Mujahedeen movement also took place during his rule.

Although successive rulers were far more moderate and liberal, they did not dare to make efforts to rid the country of extremism thanks to the clout the conservative sections had acquired. The political expediency carries on till today.

In the run up to the 2008 general election, Asif Ali Zardari – now the president – had promised to revoke the blasphemy law. However, after Punjab Governor Salman Taseer was killed for calling the blasphemy law a black law on January 4, 2011, Zardari's government announced the withdrawal of member of National Assembly Sherry Rehman's private bill to amend the law. Less than two months later, Shahbaz Bhatti, a strong voice against the law, was killed.

The blasphemy law is dear to Islamic extremists and jihadi terrorists mainly because it is a symbol of what they want Pakistan to be, irrespective of its practical utility. The significance of this law is to be seen in light of a strong sense of loss of Islamic identity that has gripped the extremist elements.

The vote-share of Islamists in politics is negligible in Pakistan, and the government is gradually showing more commitment in fighting the Pakistani Taliban – especially since the Pakistani military raid on the Lal Masjid, an extremist mosque and madrassas in the capital city of Islamabad, in July 2007 on the behest of the United States. This has made the extremists and terrorists extremely anxious.

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri recently wrote a book, "The Morning and the Lamp," asking the people of the country to wage a war against the "un-Islamic," "apostate" State of

Pakistan, arguing that the country's Constitution was not based on Islam. The recent surge of extremist and jihadi violence in Pakistan is apparently a result of terrorists' complete loss of confidence in the State.

Seen as a mark of Pakistan's future by the jihadists, the blasphemy law may remain. And so may justification of violence and persecution of minorities in the name of protecting Islam. The government of President Zardari and Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani is a minority government, and not at the helm of affairs.

Over the years, extremists and supporters of terrorists have infiltrated most democratic institutions and State agencies – including the executive, the military, the intelligence, the police and the judiciary – as well as mosques and madrassas, which have a considerable influence over sections of the Pakistani society. For example, Pakistan's Tourism Minister Maulana Attaur Rehman is known to be a supporter of the Taliban. Recently, he made a public statement that the Taliban were the true believers of Islamic ideology, and the US the “biggest terrorist.”

The fractured government's control is limited to civic and some financial matters – that, too, as long as there is no clash with the interests of the extremists. The Taliban in Pakistan openly runs schools to indoctrinate youth and train them in making bombs and suicide attacks. Terrorist groups, such as the Jaish-e-Mohammed, openly operate through registered trusts under different names and conduct courses on jihad.

While the Pakistani government has chosen to close its eyes on extremists' activities to remain in power, the United States has its efforts focused on military operations and, to some extent, on promotion of democracy and development. But there is no visible effort to tackle the problem at its root, which is the spread of extremist and jihadist doctrines. This is why Pakistan has become a sanctuary for terrorists and extremists from all over the world.

Now, it is being reported that the next big targets of the jihadi terrorists are Sherry Rehman, a liberal Muslim from the ruling party, and Joseph Francis, a Christian lawyer who heads the Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS). Jihadists had issued a threat to Ms. Rehman, saying if she did not withdraw her bill to amend the blasphemy law before January 6, 2011, she would be killed. However, they assassinated her friend, Governor Salman Taseer, instead on January 4, followed by Shahbaz Bhatti on March 2 for their advocacy for Pakistani Christian woman Asia Bibi who had been convicted by a trial court for blasphemy.

Ms. Rehman has reportedly confined herself to her home and her travel plans are being kept secret. However, Joseph Francis does not have the resources to guard himself against the threat. But, keeping in mind that terrorists target mainly those who can give them publicity, the Christian media must not create hype about the threat to Francis, as that could be counter-productive.

As far as routine attacks on local Christians are concerned, they are carried out mainly by Islamic extremists who have support of and connections with terror groups, such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ). Given the corruption in and the weakness of the government and its agencies, protecting the Christians is a big challenge.

However, first and foremost, local Christians should be encouraged to take all threats very seriously. They should promptly seek police protection and take all possible precautionary measures as soon as they apprehend trouble. For attacks invariably follow threats, and killings follow minor attacks and conflicts. In many instances, the attackers have returned to kill within hours or days.

Then, a long-term approach should be adopted to tackle the root of the violence. Washington must be lobbied to seek the expansion of the US operations in Pakistan to include efforts to counter Islamic extremism and jihadi terrorism ideologically. The growth of extremist mosques, madrassas and clergy must be checked. Stepping up of the Drone strikes alone will not help. The US must also push the Pakistan Army and intelligence to destroy the breeding grounds of extremism. Besides, the US must begin to support and empower liberal Sunni Muslim groups to position themselves as an alternative to the extremist ideologies.

Let us keep Pakistani Christians in our prayers as they face an unprecedented wave of persecution.

Why Christian Persecution is Worrisome in Sri Lanka

June 14, 2013

Four years after its military victory over Tamil Tigers, Sri Lanka appears to be seeking to establish social and political supremacy of the Sinhala Buddhist majority within a unitary state, instead of bringing about reconciliation. And this post-war resurgence of nationalism no longer threatens only the Tamil ethnic minority, but also religious minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims.

While attacks on Muslims have hit the headlines in some foreign media in recent months, the increasing incidence of Christian persecution has received little attention internationally.

The *Bodu Bala Sena* (Buddhist Power Force or BBS) and the *Sinhala Ravaya* (Sinhala Echo) – currently the most active Buddhist Right-wing groups which claim to protect the country's Sinhalese-Buddhist character – have led numerous attacks on Christians and churches.

This year thus far, at least 30 churches have reported being attacked. Last year, Sri Lanka witnessed 52 incidents of Christian persecution.

It's not just these “non-state” actors, but authorities are also targeting churches. Many churches have reported that administrative and police officials have ordered them not to operate any longer because they have not been “authorized” by the state.

While registration of religious organizations is not mandatory in Sri Lanka, the government has been contemplating bringing all religious groups under regulation for over a year. Churches last year complained they received a circular stating that all new constructions or continuation of places of worship will need prior approval from the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Authorities are targeting particularly non-traditional or evangelical churches, apparently due to the suspicion that they might become part of the country's civil society and pose a threat to the incumbent government in the future.

According to the 2011 census, more than 70 percent of Sri Lanka's population of 20.8 million is Buddhist. Christians are about 7.5 percent, and Muslims a little less than 10 percent. About 80 percent of the Christians are Catholics, and the rest are Protestants. About 40 percent of the Protestants are ethnic Tamils.

Evangelical Christians are being portrayed as enemies of the majority community. For example, the BBS organized a large gathering in Colombo in February, where a prominent leader of the group called on Archbishop of Colombo Cardinal Malcom Ranjith to create a

Catholic force of his own against evangelical Christians “who were attempting to perpetuate Christian extremism in the country.”

The hate campaign against Muslims and Christians has been so fierce and frequent that sections of the people are seemingly convinced that hapless religious minorities can actually threaten the interests of the powerful majority community.

Last month, a 30-year-old Buddhist monk set himself alight in the central city of Kandy to protest against the slaughter of cattle and “conversion of Buddhists” by Christians. Later, about 200 Buddhists, supposedly supporters of the BBS, blocked traffic in Colombo, demanding state funeral for the monk. While the mob eventually dispersed without their demand being met, they vowed to keep up pressure on the government to stop the slaughter of animals and ensure there were no “unethical religious conversions.”

The BBS was founded in July 2012 by two Buddhist monks, who were formerly with the *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU), a political party of monks and part of the ruling alliance. The two monks left the JHU, saying the party was not militant enough to protect Buddhism.

The *Sinhala Ravaya* was also founded by a group of Buddhist monks in recent months, and is believed to be headed by a former parliamentarian from the JHU. The group has publicly supported top officials of the government.

Leaders and members of the BBS and the *Sinhala Ravaya* are apparently being backed by authorities, as they have openly spread hatred against the religious minorities and launched attacks on them with almost complete impunity.

Azath Salley, leader of the newly formed Muslim Tamil National Alliance and former deputy mayor of Colombo who is known for criticizing the BBS and the current government, was arrested last month under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for “inciting religious disharmony” by giving an interview to a magazine in neighbouring India.

Salley had spoken against a March 28 attack by BBS monks on a Muslim-owned clothing warehouse, Fashion Bug, near Colombo. A mob of about 500 people had vandalized Fashion Bug, injuring at least six people.

The resurgence of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism can be attributed to the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009, which by some was seen as a victory of Buddhism over Tamil nationalism. Besides, the end of the war led to contemplations over the identity of the state, giving space to promotion of nationalism. This also helps the government to legitimize the brutal military force it used in the war and the tens of thousands of civilian casualties that occurred as a result. This explains why the government is building Buddhist temples and shrines in Hindu-majority areas in the north and the east, where the war took place.

Moreover, the government appears to be desperate to garner popular support – on which the survival of some top officials depends in the post-war scenario – by aggressively pursuing Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

If the propaganda against Christians and Muslims carries on unabated and the government continues to provide impunity to Buddhist groups, the space for religious minorities to practise their basic freedoms is likely to shrink much further. The International community needs to act sooner than later.

Protestant Churches Could be Next on Target in Sri Lanka

March 22, 2012

By Fernando Perez

The United Nations Human Rights Council today passed a resolution calling on Sri Lanka to properly investigate alleged war crimes during its onslaught against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This shows that while Sri Lanka was able to gather support from nations in the global south during the final phase of the war in 2009, opinion has now shifted away from Colombo. Neighboring India, for example, voted with the United States in passing of the resolution. The international condemnation it brings along is likely to make President Mahinda Rajapaksa more authoritarian at home.

A panel appointed by the U.N. last year found that both the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE had committed war crimes during the last days of the civil war, and tens of thousands of civilians lost their lives after shelling by troops on a no-fire zone. Colombo responded by saying the report was flawed, and formed its own Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), which did not deal with the issue of accountability and was therefore unacceptable to most Western nations.

However, concerns over Sri Lanka are not only about war crimes, but also about what followed, continues and may remain for years to come. Sri Lanka was under a state of emergency for six years since 2005. It was lifted last September, about two years after the government's military victory over Tamil Tigers. But before doing so, President Rajapaksa suppressed and silenced the political opposition, the media and the civil society, and thereby sought to abolish every threat to his power. Now, it appears that the government sees Protestant churches also as a threat and moving towards bringing them under its control.

Behind President Rajapaksa's authoritarianism is ambition as well as a desperate sense of insecurity in a democratic set up, after all the bloody war killed a very large number of civilians. Rajapaksa and his brothers, who have been appointed at key positions, are paving the way to remain in power for decades to ensure their safety.

Rajapaksa oversaw the passing of the 18th constitutional amendment, removing the two-term ceiling for the president. The amendment also ripped the election commission of its power to prevent the use of state resources during elections. Additionally, it abolished the constitutional council which would oversee the running of public services including the judiciary, police, anti-corruption bodies and elections. The council's powers were transferred to the office of the president.

Several members of political opposition, journalists and civil society leaders have been killed, abducted, attacked and threatened. As a result, there little that is published or openly spoken against the government in the country.

In the north and the east, formerly under the control of Tamil Tigers, the Sri Lankan government has deployed military personnel in huge numbers, indicating that it has no

intention to share power with ethnic Tamils who were seeking an ethnic homeland due to alleged discriminatory policies of the Sinhala-Buddhist dominated regime. Instead of making efforts towards reconciliation after the war, the government is “colonizing” Tamil-majority areas.

“The construction of large and permanent military cantonments, the seizure of private and state land, and the military-led cultural and demographic changes – all threaten Sri Lanka’s fragile peace,” said Alan Keenan, International Crisis Group’s Senior Analyst and Sri Lanka Project Director in a recent report. “Instead of giving way to a process of inclusive, accountable development, the military is increasing its economic role, controlling land and seemingly establishing itself as a permanent presence.”

Moreover, the government has built numerous “Victory Monuments” with Buddhist symbols, constructed Buddhist temples, and promoted Sinhalese settlements in predominantly Tamil areas.

Yet President Rajapaksa’s position continues to be precarious. In addition to the international sentiments now turning against Sri Lanka, the government is finding it difficult to keep the people even in the Sinhala-majority south happy.

The government curbed civil freedoms and waged the war against the LTTE with support from sections of the ethnic Sinhalese majority, using the excuse that the defeat of the rebels would help the country attain significant economic development. However, over-expenditure on the war and the subsequent militarization of the country coupled with widespread corruption have adversely affected the economy. China had thus far invested in and given loans to the country in exchange for its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. However, Chinese money does not seem capable of stimulating Sri Lanka’s economy any further. Last month, there were apolitical protests over fuel price rise despite the alleged use of ammunition by government forces.

Colombo therefore continues to strive to consolidate its hold on all segments of society. Next on the government’s target could be Christians.

About 70 percent of the population of Sri Lanka is Buddhist, 15 percent Hindu, 8 percent Christian, and 7 percent Muslim. Almost 80 percent of the Christians are Roman Catholics, with whom the Sri Lankan government has hardly had problems. But the regime has been suspicious of Protestant groups.

It is estimated that more than 40 percent of Protestant Christians in Sri Lanka are ethnic Tamils. And Protestant Christians in general are known for their zeal for social work, including speaking for the voiceless. Evangelicals in particular are seen as closely linked to rich and powerful American organizations. The government perhaps foresees an emergence of civil society from evangelical Christians, which can become a threat to it.

The government seems to be contemplating mandatory registration of churches. Local churches complain that they have received a circular saying all any new construction or continuation of a place of worship will require prior approval from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. However, when more details were sought from officials, they refused to give any information.

It appears that the government is testing the waters to see how the Christian community responds to what soon might be implemented as a national policy. Given its intent, compulsory registration of churches will greatly hamper independence of churches, which is a prerequisite for religious freedom.

Societal attacks on Christians have also increased in the recent past.

On March 11, unidentified people hurled stones at the Assembly of God Church in Kotiyakumbara, Kegalle District, at about midnight, causing damage to nine asbestos roof sheets. The pastor of the church lodged a complaint at the Ruwanwella police station. (The reference number of the police complaint is CIB ii142154.)

On Feb. 20, a group of about 30 Buddhist monks threatened to kill a pastor unless he left his village, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Ambalangoda police station in Kalle District. Accusing the pastor of converting Buddhists, one of the monks slapped and beat him. A few days later, the gate of the pastor's house was found vandalized. (The reference number of the police complaint is CIP2/329/379.)

On Jan. 4, a Buddhist association in a village lodged a police complaint against pastor saying he was constructing a church without "permission" from authorities although he was leading a congregation of about 100 believers for about 11 years in Wellawaya area in Monaragala District. Police advised him to stop leading the church. (The reference number of the police complaint is CIBII 194/21.)

Another tool the government can use against Christians is the anti-conversion bill, first introduced in parliament by the *Jathika Hela Urumaya*, JHU or a political party of mostly right-wing Buddhist monks, in 2004. The Supreme Court ruled that some provisions of the bill were unconstitutional and therefore it was referred to a parliamentary committee for revision. The revised bill is ready and can be presented in parliament any time.

The international community is rightly raising its voice against war crimes, but there is also a need for raising issues concerning the post-war policies of the Sri Lankan government.

Future of Minorities at Stake in Bangladesh's Secular-Islamist Clash

May 07, 2013

Bangladesh's politics has been polarized since the nation's secession from Pakistan in 1971, but, of late, the schism between secular and Islamic groups has deepened to a fearsome level. What began as violent opposition to the ongoing trials of liberation war criminals in recent months, has now turned into Islamist demands for the nation's Islamization – at a time when parliamentary elections are due in a few months.

The Muslim-majority country of 160 million people has been witnessing violent protests since the International Crimes Tribunal awarded life imprisonment to Abdul Quader Mollah, assistant secretary-general of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* (the largest Islamist party in the country) and sentenced *Jamaat* Vice President Delawar Hossain Sayedee to death.

The trials concern atrocities during the 1971 liberation war, when the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators who were against Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan killed more than 3 million people and raped more than 200,000 girls and women. Those who supported the liberation war saw ethnicity more important than religion. And those who were for religion-based nationalism were against the secession.

The ruling Awami League party belongs to those who supported the nation's separation. During the 2008 general election, the party promised to establish the war crime tribunals – and won the election with an unprecedented majority.

Protests were inevitable. The *Jamaat* and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have sponsored protests beginning December 2012, with protesters detonating small homemade bombs. While the BNP is not generally extremist, its ally, the *Jamaat*, is for the creation of an Islamic state with Sharia law, closer relations with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and outlawing un-Islamic practices and laws.

On the other hand, progressive youth and bloggers – who do not seem to have any affiliation to any political organization or group – have held protests at the Shahbagh square in Central Dhaka, decrying leniency on part of the government in giving stricter sentences to the war convicts and calling for true secularism.

Further, protests have been held by Islamist groups like *Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh* ('Protecting Islam in Bangladesh' or HIB) to counter the Shahbagh movement. And, in turn, even secularists have formed a new group, known as *Gono Jagoron Moncho* (Platform for Mass Awakening) to counter the HIB.

Meanwhile, blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider, who played a key role organizing the Shahbagh movement, was hacked to death by members of a new Islamist outfit, *Ansarullah Bangla Team*, which is believed to have links with al Qaeda. Another blogger, Asif Mohiuddin, was earlier stabbed but survived.

Protests took a different turn on April 6, when the HIB presented the government with a 13-point demand at a Dhaka rally, which included greater change in the constitution for rule by Sharia, virtual segregation of women, and death sentence for those who insult Islam or the Prophet.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has unequivocally rejected these demands. She recently told BBC that Bangladesh “is a secular democracy, so each and every religion has a right to practise their religion freely.” This has led to further violence. Most recently, on May 6, at least 27 people died in clashes between police and Islamists who were calling for an anti-blasphemy law. The protesters blocked roads, attacked a police station and set fire to at least 30 vehicles. The HIB had given time until May 5 to the government to implement their demands.

The HIB is calling for an anti-blasphemy law despite the fact that Section 295A of Penal Code (1860) provides that any person who has a “deliberate” or “malicious” intention of “hurting religious sentiments” can be subject to imprisonment – the section has been misused as a virtual anti-blasphemy law.

What is fearsome is that the HIB is linked to Quami madrassas (as opposed to the state-regulated private madrassas popularly known as Aliya madrassas). These madrassas have students from economically lower backgrounds and who are given only religious instructions. The Quami madrassas have rejected the government’s call for integration into the education system that the Aliya madrassas follow, which includes both religious and modern subjects.

Islamists had apparently been looking for an excuse to unleash violence and demand Islamization since 2010, when the country’s Supreme Court declared the fifth and eighth amendments of the constitution null and void. The amendments had established Islam as the state religion and allowed religion-based politics – a departure from the spirit of the original constitution. The apex court’s 2010 verdicts restored the four pillars of the state – democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism – as was mentioned in the 1972 constitution.

However, the Awami League government in June 2011 oversaw the passing of a constitutional amendment bill (the 15th Amendment) to retain Islam as the state religion along with the use of the word “Bismillah” (an Arabic phrase meaning in the name of God), while reaffirming the country as a secular state. Secularists have questioned if secularism and Islam as the state religion can coexist. The government has also indicated that the ban on religion-based parties will not be strictly enforced.

Prime Minister Hasina appears to be treading cautiously, not wanting to take a firm stand on the issues of Islam as the state religion and banning of religion-based parties, perhaps out of fear of a major unrest by Islamists.

In the ongoing ideological clash, a lot is at stake for the future of religious minorities. While thus far, mostly Hindus and Ahmaddiyas have been persecuted, the sudden increase in

Islamist assertion could soon result in targeting of minority Christians, too. Islamist violence against minorities in general has already increased.

The forthcoming general election, due in early 2014, is likely to play a key role in the future of the nation and the minorities. While currently the majority of the people, the judiciary and the ruling alliance are all for secularism and religious freedom, some opposition groups appear desperate to turn the nation into an “Islamic state.”

Despite the loud Islamist voices, the mood in the nation appears to be for secularism and religious moderation. However, the task before Hasina is not easy. She will need not only to win the votes in the election, but also legitimacy at home and internationally. Some international human rights groups have turned against Hasina due to her handling of the trials and use of force against protesters.

Given that Bangladesh is no stranger to coup d'états, emergencies and political violence, an election that is not widely seen as legitimate can lead to chaos and instability. Hasina, therefore, will need to avoid heavy-handedness and violent confrontation with opposition parties, which would only weaken her chances of remaining at the helm and that of fulfilling her party's pledges to rid the country of terrorism and bring war criminals to justice.

Census in Nepal Marks 2.3 Million Christians as Hindus

December 26, 2012

Christian leaders of Nepal complain that the numerical strength of the minority has been grossly underestimated in the nation's first census after it became a democracy. The alleged manipulation in the census data while the nation is transitioning from a Hindu monarchy to a secular republic is worrisome.

"We can produce concrete proof of our numbers as we have registered all our members at over 8,500 churches. We are above 2.5 million but the census of 2011 shows us to be just 300,000," C.B. Gahatraj, general secretary of the Federation of National Christians of Nepal (FNCN), said at a press conference in Kathmandu this month.

The number of Christians has increased from about 0.4 percent in 2007, when the country was officially declared as a secular state after over two centuries of Hindu monarchy, to 1.4 percent of the 26.4 million people as per the Census 2011 report by the Central Bureau of Statistics.

However, the latest figures are a result of apparent manipulations, said Dr. K.B. Rokaya, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Nepal, with whom WEA-RLC spoke in Kathmandu.

Dr. Rokaya, who is also member of the government's National Human Rights Commission, said he suspects "double manipulation."

Enumerators are known for not visiting every house, and when they do visit a house, they presume that anyone with a Hindu name is a Hindu, he said. "When enumerators came to my house, they asked questions about family members but not about our religion. My wife noticed they had already marked us as Hindus," he said.

"When preliminary results of the census were declared [in late September 2011], we were told that the number of Christians was 2 million, despite the fact that a large number of Christians were presumably marked as Hindus," Dr. Rokaya said, suggesting that even 2 million was an underestimation of the actual number. But the final census report, which came about 14 months later without explaining the reason for the delay, put the number of Christians at just 375,699, he added.

Since all previous censuses were conducted when Nepal was under a Hindu monarchy, – when religious minorities did not have equal rights – most people preferred to be identified as Hindu. About 80.6 percent of people said they were Hindu in the 2001 census. However, even in the 2011 census, the percentage of Hindus remains unchanged at about 81 percent.

While the coverage of Nepal in the international media has been dominated by a continuing logjam between political parties as they draft the country's new constitution and try to complete the peace process, there is little awareness about the nation's status quoist forces, particularly in the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the military, which are resisting progressive changes.

About 85 percent of officials in the government are from the dominant Brahmin and Chhetri castes (as per the caste hierarchy in Hinduism), Dr. Rokaya said. Brahmins and Chhetris, who account for about 30 percent of the total population, are generally known for not having accepted the country's Republican status in their minds.

The country's first elected representatives, who are seeking reforms in the country, are also against full religious freedom. A committee under the Constituent Assembly of Nepal, which included the three largest political parties – the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) and the Nepali Congress – prepared a draft constitution to replace the 2007 interim constitution, proposing many progressive changes, but not so much in the area of religious freedom. The draft charter seeks to retain the ban on activities aimed at religious conversion.

WEA-RLC had earlier spoken to Binda Pandey, who headed the Assembly's Committee on Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles (CFRDP), and she said, "We had a detailed discussion on religious freedom provisions and we came to the conclusion that one can convert from one religion to another individually, but any activity aimed at converting someone else may not be allowed."

Additionally, the Christian minority is still awaiting legal recognition for their churches and land for burial. "The government had promised to form a separate commission for Christians, provide us land for graveyards and give our churches recognition as religious trusts, among other things," Gahatraj said at the press conference in Kathmandu, referring to a six-point agreement between the government and the Christian confederation signed earlier this year. "The agreement was supposed to be enforced immediately but nothing has been done till now."

Nepal is still in its early period of transition to a secular democracy, but it may not take too long for the country's status quoist forces to institutionalize the bias against Christians and other minorities, which must be nipped in the bud.

Religious Freedom at Risk in Nepal

September 13, 2010

The Constituent Assembly of Nepal is to draft a new constitution to replace the 2007 interim constitution currently in force. While many progressive changes have been proposed by the Assembly's committees on key areas of governance, the committee on fundamental rights wants the country to retain the ban on activities aimed at religious conversion.

Until 2006, Nepal was world's only Hindu kingdom, which survived sporadically for 239 years. The Himalayan nation, situated between India and China, is currently in transition from a monarchy to a republic. To formalize this transition, the Assembly, which was formed by an election in 2008, was mandated to draft the new constitution within two years while also acting as Nepal's parliament. The Assembly's term was, however, extended by one more year as it could not meet the May 28, 2010 deadline.

The delay was due to a lack of consensus among Nepal's political parties on some "key" provisions in the new constitution such as federalism. Religious freedom was seemingly a non-issue. Although none of the major political parties – the country's largest United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) or the Nepali Congress – is against religious minorities, their views on religious freedom do not seem progressive.

The 2007 interim constitution – which was drafted by a committee representing all major parties to replace the one promulgated by the monarchy in 1990 and which currently governs Nepal – restricts religious freedom. It states that a person may only practice religion as passed down to him/her from ancient times and bans proselytization.

WEA-RLC spoke to Ms. Binda Pandey, who heads the Assembly's Committee on Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles (CFRDP) and is a member of the Unified Marxist Leninist party, to ask her if the limits on religious freedom are likely to be lifted. "We had a detailed discussion on religious freedom provisions and we came to the conclusion that one can convert from one religion to another individually, but any activity aimed at converting someone else may not be allowed," she said.

The Preliminary Draft Pandey's committee presented to the Assembly seeks to make any attempt to convert a punishable act.

Chapter 2 of the Draft defines the "Right to Religious Freedom" as: "Every person shall have the freedom to profess, practice and preserve his or her own religion in accordance with his or her faith, or to refrain from any religion." But a clause that follows sets the ground for restrictions. It states, "Provided that no person shall be entitled to act contrary to public health, decent behaviour and morality, to indulge in activities of jeopardizing public peace or *to convert a person from one religion to another*, and no person shall act or behave in a manner which may infringe upon religion of others."

The rationale behind the restrictions, as per the draft, is: “This right cannot be claimed by any person engaged or making [an attempt] to get indulged in any activity contrary to public health, decent behaviour and morality, get indulged in activities of jeopardizing public peace or converting a person from one religion to another, and acting or behaving in a manner which may infringe upon religion of others. *This provision has been made in order to make such an act culpable.*”

The Draft was prepared after 478 hours of discussion and considering over 28,000 suggestions sent by organizations and individuals to the committee – and also after making a study of “international covenants to which Nepal has been a party (signatory), and after making a comparative study of the constitutions of different countries, as well as on the basis of the constitutional exercise of Nepal and *special circumstances.*”

None of the members of the 43-member committee on fundamental rights is Christian while there are a few Muslims and people from Nepal’s ethnic minorities.

“We received a few suggestions from some missionaries who wanted the freedom to convert, but that was not what the majority wanted,” Pandey said.

This shows that religious freedom is seen as an issue of interest to Christian missionaries alone, and not as part of people’s fundamental or human rights. Many non-governmental organizations are advocating for the rights of marginalized communities in the new constitution, but there is little visible effort by Nepal’s civil society or the international community, barring a few Christian lobby groups, to ensure religious freedom.

Nepal is a member of the United Nations and has signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as ratified its Optional Protocol. The Human Rights Committee, the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by its State parties, holds that the right to manifest one’s religion includes carrying out actions to persuade others to believe in a certain religion. Even otherwise, an individual can exercise his or her right to convert to another religion – which is permissible in the proposed scope of religious freedom in the new constitution – in a substantial manner only when there is freedom for all religious communities to propagate their religion.

According to the 2001 Census, 80.6 percent of the 29.5 million people in Nepal are Hindu. Around 10 percent are Buddhist, 4.2 percent are Muslim, and 3.6 percent followers of indigenous faiths. Christianity is practiced by less than 0.5 percent of the population. However, it is believed that since the Census was conducted during the Hindu monarchy rule, people of other faiths did not reveal their religious affiliations out of fear.

It is also believed that over 20 percent of Nepal’s population is Dalit (formerly “untouchable” according to the caste system in Hinduism) – according to the Census, Dalits comprise around 13 percent of the population. To escape societal discrimination and atrocities, many Dalits have converted to Christianity. The religious restrictions in Nepal could be targeted at Dalits converting to Christianity.

Nepal’s lawmakers are seeking to make religious restrictions even more severe than in some Indian states that have enacted anti-conversion laws for similar reasons and have faced

international criticism – for example the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. The Indian anti-conversion laws have survived scrutiny of courts only because they seek to ban conversions carried out by force or fraudulent means, at least on paper. But the proposed clause in Nepal’s new constitution treats even conversion by religious persuasion as unlawful.

India’s experience with anti-conversion laws, some of which have been in force for over 40 years, serves as a warning that legislation concerning conversion can be grossly misused by State as well as non-State actors. For it is tricky to define a religious conversion or gauge someone’s intention to convert someone else. Numerous Christian workers in India have been arrested and harassed on charges of conversion even when they engaged in social work, as any charitable act can wrongly be misconstrued as allurement. However, none of the numerous cases filed against Christian workers in India has resulted in conviction. Like in India, several right-wing Hindu groups operate in Nepal and have targeted Christian and Muslim minorities in the recent past.

The deadline for Nepal’s new constitution is eight months later, but the committees assisting the Assembly have submitted their proposals, many of which will find space in the new constitution. Moreover, the Maoists in Nepal are inching closer to politicians who favor restoration of monarchy, as both are against the intervention of India – South Asia’s largest and most influential nation – in Nepal’s domestic politics. This can weaken the case for religious freedom. However, there is still time for international advocacy and lobby groups to hold consultations with members of the Assembly and its committee on fundamental rights on the need for the expansion of religious freedom in a country that is now a democratic and secular republic.

Obama Sifted Wheat from Chaff as He Called for Religious Freedom in India

February 04, 2015

U.S. President Barack Obama's three days of diplomacy in India last week demonstrated not only Washington's pursuit of strategic interests but also its proactive disassociation from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda.

Obama was in India for Republic Day celebrations on the invitation of Modi, ironically the same man who was banned from U.S. travel for his failure to prevent the killing of more than 2,000 minority Muslims in the western Gujarat state that he ruled in 2002.

Obama accepted the invite, becoming the only U.S. President to have visited India twice in his tenure, for purely strategic reasons.

Washington recognizes India's potential to be a regional counterbalance to China's growing influence. However, India's foreign policy has traditionally been inward looking, as envisioned by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Unlike his predecessors, who made little efforts towards asserting regional leadership, Modi has international ambitions and is clearly deviating from Nehru's principles.

Modi's aspirations are rooted in Hindu nationalism, which involves a theory that India had a "glorious past" until the "invasions by Muslims and Christians," including the British rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A Hindu nationalist author, Dinanath Batra, has been promoting a related theory that Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar were all part of undivided India or "Akhand Bharat" at one time.

Books authored by Batra have been included in the school syllabus in Gujarat as per the orders of the state government, and he is now advising the federal government on education reforms.

The umbrella Hindu nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps), where Modi worked as a full-time preacher in the past, expects the prime minister to help regain India's past "glory."

A practicable way before Modi is to seek regional hegemony of a "Hindu India" to please his backers. And that's what he appears to be doing.

Modi invited all the top leaders of the regional bloc South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) at his swearing in ceremony on May 26, 2014. He has also made nine

foreign trip – including to the U.S., Japan, Australia and Brazil – in his first eight months in office.

Modi's aggressive foreign policy is expected to take on China, which competes for regional influence with India. China, for example, plans to establish a new Maritime Silk Route linking Europe to China through the Indian Ocean. In response, Modi is expected to launch Project Mausam, stretching from East Africa to Indonesia to gain control over the Indian Ocean.

This is where Modi's interests overlap with those of the United States, which wants a regional player to resist Beijing's increasing clout.

The U.S. has made a \$4bn commitment in investment and loans to India, which in turn would help New Delhi boost its economy and thereby more influence.

However, Modi – who wore a £10,000 suit decorated with his own name when he met Obama – appears to believe that his party's socially regressive policies at home are compatible with India's efforts to gain more influence in the multi-religious, culturally diverse region of South Asia.

Obama made it crystal clear that he is against Modi's Hindu nationalist vision of India.

“India will succeed so long as it is not splintered along the lines of religious faith, as long as it is not splintered along any lines, and it is unified as one nation,” Obama said in his address to mostly young Indians in New Delhi on Jan 27, according to Reuters. “Every person has the right to practice their faith how they choose, or to practice no faith at all, and to do so free of persecution and fear of discrimination.”

Obama seemed to be well aware of some recent developments in India.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), for example, is calling for a national law against religious conversions; and the government is reforming school curricula to reflect “Indian” (which can be read as Hindu nationalist) values.

Groups affiliated with the RSS, which are legally non-governmental and charitable organizations, are being given a say in policy-making. Representatives of these Hindu nationalist outfits meet federal ministers on a regular basis to give their input on various issues facing the government.

These organizations, which are blamed for violently attacking religious minorities, are obviously feeling emboldened and have become influential. An example of this can be seen in the recent “preventive” arrest of a Christian preacher, Arvind D'Souza, for “spreading the word of Christianity” in northern Uttar Pradesh's Amethi town. State police arrested D'Souza for 14 days to “maintain law and order” after such groups opposed his evangelism, according to The Times of India.

A website that monitors Christian persecution, SpeakOutAgainstHate.org, has recorded at least

19 attacks on Christians in the first five weeks of this year thus far.

It was in this context that Obama's nudge was understood in India.

"I do hope that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was listening to the [Obama's] speech carefully," Manish Tewari, an opposition leader from the Left-of-Centre Congress party, said, referring to "majoritarian ethos that goes against the grain of liberal democracy," according to Reuters.

Obama, through his speech, managed to separate the "wheat," i.e. Washington's strategic interests in India, from the "chaff," or Modi's vision that views development merely as modern infrastructure with regressive social policies – something that even a nation like Saudi Arabia can boast of.

India's Karnataka State Needs Immediate Attention

October 24, 2012

Attacks on Christians in the south Indian state of Karnataka are being reported almost every other day. And now, with the state assembly election not too far away, the frequency and the intensity of attacks might further increase. For, the ruling Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) appears to be consolidating its Hindu votebank in the wake of a new crisis.

Attacks on Christians shot up in the state after the BJP came to power on its own in May 2008, after being part of a ruling alliance with a regional party, the *Janata Dal-Secular*, for about 20 months. While Hindu nationalist groups had been working in Karnataka for decades - due to the presence of some highly influential Hindu shrines in the state, those groups began to freely implement their agenda only after the BJP's rise to power.

In the months of August and September in 2008, at least 28 attacks were reported in the state. According to the New Delhi-based Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), Karnataka saw at least 48 attacks in 2009, and in 2010 the number increased to 56. In 2011, the number slightly decreased to 49 attacks.

However, the incidence of attacks has been much higher in the recent months. And the total number of attacks is expected to be unprecedented by the end of this year, thanks to a crisis within the Hindu nationalist party which could further deepen as the election comes closer.

Some key leaders of the Karnataka unit of the BJP are facing corruption charges, and the party is also divided within. Former chief minister B.S. Yeddyurappa, who was accused of illegally allotting land and illegally granting mining licenses, was forced by the national party leadership to resign in July 2011. Now, he has announced his decision to leave the party and form his own "secular" political group by December.

Yeddyurappa belongs to the Karnataka's largest caste community, Lingayat. Though also Hindus, the Lingayats - who represent more than 20 percent of the state's population - differ from mainstream Hinduism in certain religious matters. And they have a distinct sense of identity as opposed to other Hindu caste groups. The BJP's first-ever election victory in Karnataka in 2008 was attributed to the party's decision to have Yeddyurappa, from the Lingayat community, as its chief ministerial candidate.

Now in the run up to the state election due in 2013, the BJP had little choice but to let Yeddyurappa leave. For, corruption is currently the biggest national issue, and the party could not take a risk by featuring him again as its chief ministerial candidate.

Therefore, the BJP can no longer depend on the Lingayat votebank for re-election in 2013. BJP's second-most influential Lingayat leader in the state, Jagadish Shettar, may or may not be able to bring many votes from the community. Moreover, Yeddyurappa is also expected to take several legislators of the BJP to his new party.

So how will the BJP deal with the crisis? A statement recently made by a former leader of the *Bajrang Dal*, a violent Hindu extremist group that has been closely associated with the BJP, sheds light on this question.

The BJP is trying to bring the state's Hindus together by raising issues against Christians and Muslims, Mahendra Kumar, who was state unit president of the *Bajrang Dal* until 2009, told the *Tehelka* magazine recently. "They [state BJP leaders] are in a process of consolidating the Hindu vote bank as they will have to face polls in 2013," he said, referring to Yeddyurappa's expected departure.

Due to the caste system in Hinduism, and politicization of those caste divisions, no party can easily mobilize Hindus as one votebank. However, this has been done for years by projecting the Christian and Muslim minorities as enemies of all Hindus.

Kumar, who was in jail for 42 days as the main accused in a spate of attacks on Christians in 2008, divulged more to the magazine. He said the days he spent in jail proved to be a turning point of his life, and led him to eventually quit the Hindu nationalist movement.

Kumar confirmed what many in India believe, that Hindu nationalism, or *Hindutva*, "is a political strategy and it has nothing to do with Hinduism or the welfare or benefit of Hindu society." He added that Hindu nationalists play on emotions, "projecting wrong history and some negative points of the minority community, hatred is sown among the Hindu youth," merely to get Hindu votes. Hindu nationalists typically allege that Christians are bribing Hindus to convert them, and denigrating their gods.

Raising the issue of conversion may also be to divert people's attention away from corruption charges on BJP leaders and the visible divide within. For example, on Oct. 24, when television channels questioned BJP national president Nitin Gadkari on source of funds for companies owned by him, Mohan Bhagwat, the chief of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) that is believed to be the parent organization of the BJP, suddenly called for the construction of a temple of Hindu god Rama where once the Babri Mosque stood in the northern Uttar Pradesh state. The call for the Ram temple at the disputed location has been one of the most divisive communal issues independent India has witnessed in its history.

Christian groups in India have diligently reported incidents of violence against Christians in Karnataka and other states. Since the documentation is available, they could possibly approach the Karnataka High Court through a writ petition, seeking issuance of directives to the state police and government to ensure the security of the minority community. This is perhaps the only way to compel the state to do its duty as long as the BJP is the ruling party.

A New Dimension of Christian Persecution in India

May 19, 2011

The politics of Hindu nationalism, which fuelled Christian persecution for over a decade in India, seems to be losing ground. With this comes the hope that India will never witness an incident like the massive flurry of attacks in Kandhamal district of eastern Orissa state in 2008 which killed around 100 Christians and displaced over 50,000 people. This wish is expected to come true, but the absence of mass violence may not ensure the safety of the Christian minority.

Since India did not see any incident of “mass violence” on Christians in the last three years, the issue of Christian persecution is increasingly being seen by the media as a passé. For example, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recently put India on its watch-list on account of the country’s failure to bring to justice the accused in the Kandhamal violence and a few similar incidents in which the Muslim and Sikh minorities were the victims. But this found little mention in the Indian or international mainstream media.

The notion of communal peace, seen as absence of mass violence, is misleading. The frequency of attacks on Christians, which remains as high as it has been for the last 13 years in India, is an equally determining factor.

Indian Christian groups, including the Evangelical Fellowship of India, the All India Christian Council, the Global Council of Indian Christians and the Catholic Secular Forum, continue to report on violent attacks on Christians on a regular basis. It’s not surprising that India is the only country which caused Compass Direct News, a US-based agency covering Christian persecution worldwide, to start a special “Briefs” column in addition to its regular “Flash” and “Feature” stories a few years ago, thanks to the high incidence of attacks. This column – with each “India Briefs” story carrying at least five incidents – is being run until today. In the last month of April, Compass Direct News released four “India Briefs” stories in addition to two “Flash” stories on India.

Statistics by Christian groups in India clearly indicate that there has been no let up in the systematic persecution of Christians ever since it began in 1998, the year the Right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed a coalition government at the federal level. The BJP’s emergence coincided with the arrival of Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, a Catholic and the wife of the late prime minister of India Rajiv Gandhi, in national politics. Her appointment as the chief of the Indian National Congress party led to the political targeting of Christians by the BJP and associated Hindu nationalist forces under the pretext of religious conversions.

From 2001 to 2004, at least 200 attacks on Christians were reported each year. There were around 165 anti-Christian attacks in 2005, and 130 in 2006. The following two years, 2007 and 2008, turned out to be the most violent years, vis-à-vis Christian persecution, since the Independence of India in 1947. During the Christmas week of 2007, at least four Christians were killed and 730 houses and 95 churches torched in Kandhamal, Orissa. A repeat of

violence in Kandhamal killed over 100 people and burned 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions in 2008. Apart from these major incidents, 2007 and 2008 each saw around 200 attacks in various parts of the country. The year 2009 witnessed more than 152 attacks, and 2010 saw at least 149. The actual number of incidents is likely to be much higher than reported, as not all cases are formally registered or come to light.

While it is good that the Indian voters are disapproving of the use of Hindu nationalism by political parties – as was evident in the defeat of the BJP in the last two general elections in 2004 and 2009 – it may not bring much respite to the minorities. For India's Hindu nationalists are expedient enough to adjust their strategies to suit the political mood of the country while continuing to further their agenda at a different level. It is an open secret that while there are a number of Hindu nationalist groups, some having separate legal entities and others informal groupings, they all are linked to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the leader of the movement and the ideological mentor of the BJP.

The Hindu nationalists may not let their activities become a political issue now, but they will continue to spew hate against Christians, alleging that they are converting Hindus to Christianity by inducement and coercion.

There is talk about Hindu nationalists using a moderate form of their ideology, but one essential characteristic of Hindutva, a Hindu nationalist ideology, that has remained non-negotiable for them over the years, is that non-Hindu minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims, cannot be accepted as true Indians unless they become "Hindu."

The Hindutva ideology was articulated at a time when independence from British rule was foreseeable during the early 20th century. It was inspired by several Hindu reform movements that were birthed during the second half of the 19th century to counter "Western superiority and supremacy" that was being used to justify colonialism. At the heart of the Hindutva dream was a "nation," as it existed before the "Muslim invasion" by Central Asian powers in the 12th century followed by the "Christian invasion" from Britain in the 18th century.

According to the RSS founder Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, anyone who calls himself a Hindu is a Hindu; anyone whose father is a Hindu is a Hindu; and anyone the RSS calls a Hindu is a Hindu. And the RSS says even Christians are Hindu but they do not "behave" like one, and cannot do so because their religion originated in a foreign land.

Subjected to this ideology, many Indians – especially sections of the people in the states where the BJP and other groups have built a strong support base, such as Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh – see minorities as "outsiders" and approve of violence as a means to oppose "conversions."

The Hindutva ideology is still being propagated in many parts of the country, especially by pragmatic Hindu nationalist workers. But some of them have lost hope that the Hindu nation can be a reality if they use democratic ways. They have turned more extremists and are waging a war against the minorities with underground terrorist activities. Investigation agencies have arrested and are prosecuting several extremist Hindu nationalists for exploding bombs targeting minorities, mainly Muslims. Those facing terrorism charges have reportedly been behind anti-Christian violence as well.

It is difficult to anticipate how the recent development of Right-wing Hindu terrorism will play out in the future, but it seems almost certain that pragmatic Hindu nationalists will remain as active as, if not more than, they have been in the past – though in a fashion that does not attract too much attention. This will mean more attacks but less coverage by the mainstream media, which tends to look at the magnitude of an attack and fails to see it as part of a trend.

The best way to counter this new Hindu nationalist strategy is to streamline the reporting of Christian persecution and highlight statistics periodically. This may require compilation of incidents by one Christian agency which can diligently verify reports of attacks using high standards of professional, ethical reporting.

Hope for Civil Rights at Risk in Maldivian Crisis

February 17, 2012

Police and military officials, allegedly led by supporters of former longtime dictatorial President Abdul Maumoon Gayoom, forced President Mohamed Nasheed to resign on Feb. 7. The international community merely looked on his ouster, caring little that it will have bearing on civil rights of the Maldivian people.

The unusual circumstances that led to the regime change in the Maldives should have caused the United States and the European Union to question the legitimacy of the new President Mohamed Waheed Hassan. But the two powers instead chose to recognize him out of fear that, if they did not do so, China would grant that favor and achieve another milestone in the strategic Indian Ocean Region, which contains vital sea lanes.

The Indian Ocean has attracted great powers, including Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union, since World War II. And the region has strategic stakes for the West, given its competition with China, which many believe will some time in future overtake the U.S. economy. The Western concern is understandable. However, the diplomacy by the U.S. and the E.U. in the Maldives completely overlooked the objective of the coup d'état, which was to overthrow the Maldives' first democratic president who was gradually working on liberating the archipelago from civil and religious repression.

Gayoom, whose supporters are now at the helm of this nation of roughly 330,000 Sunni Muslims, enacted the Protection of Religious Unity Act of 1994 to unify the practice and preaching of Islam and to restrict practice and expression of any religion other than Islam. During his 30-year rule, Gayoom cracked down on Christian expats on suspicion of missionary work and deported them. He also imprisoned a few local converts.

During Nasheed's presidency, his opponents raised fierce objections against his moves, such as Maldivian troops joining the United Nation-led peacekeeping operations to conflict zones, doctors from Israel coming into the country for purely medical work, and granting of civil rights to the people. They saw these developments as anti-Islamic. They sought to impeach the education minister in June 2009 when he proposed making Islam and the Dhivehi language optional – from compulsory – for senior classes in schools.

Maldivian Chief Justice Ahmed Faiz Hussein recently criticized a silent protest by a few citizens for religious tolerance on Dec. 10. He said it “shocked the nation” and indicated weakening of the country's Islamic faith. In November last year, when the Maldives hosted the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit for the first time, a mob believed to be led by Gayoom's supporters vandalized a banner that carried a painting of Jesus' face representing Christianity as one of the religions of South Asia. Even when the alleged coup was taking place this month, extremists were vandalizing Hindu and Buddhist artifacts belonging to the country's pre-Islamic era at the Maldives national museum in the capital city of Male.

Nasheed unseated Gayoom in the 2008 presidential election, but he could not win a majority in Parliament in the May 2009 parliamentary election. Like the United States, the Maldives has a presidential system, where the president may or may not have a majority in Parliament. Consequently, all Nasheed's attempts to deviate from conservative policies of Gayoom were blocked by the latter's Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) legislators. Since Gayoom had appointed his loyalists in the administration as well as the country's courts, Nasheed faced opposition from all sides as he sought to bring in reforms. Even some of the allies of Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) were extremely conservative, which compelled his party to carry on with repressive laws.

The pretext of the coup was Nasheed's act of arresting Chief Justice of the Criminal Court Abdulla Mohamed as he had refused to allow a government investigation into corruption charges on Gayoom. Nasheed claimed he did so out of his obligation for the greater cause of democracy. It was a bad move, but he had been seeking help from the international community saying the opposition was not allowing his government to function – in vain. Yet he was gradually addressing civil rights issues.

Far from rewarding him for boldly making an attempt to reform the Maldives, which is the only country after Saudi Arabia which claims to be 100 percent Muslim, the international community has almost entirely abandoned him. This will embolden the country's Islamist extremists.

Police manhandled Nasheed on the streets and beat up and tortured his party members, including former party head Mariya Didi, after the coup. There are also reports of police barging into the homes of MDP members and leaders and spraying pepper into their eyes and genitals. It's not just political vendetta, but an ideological war with a religious component. Yet, there is no international condemnation of what Nasheed's opponents are doing.

If Nasheed's ouster completes without any international criticism, it will be a great setback to the cause of democracy and civil rights, including religious freedom, in the archipelago. Nasheed's five-year term in office was to be over in late 2013, and President Waheed doesn't seem to be in a mood to hold election earlier than that, fearing that the MDP might come back to power. Waheed recently said he was willing for an early election, but it is highly likely that he will try to push polls as far as he can under the pretext that the atmosphere in the country is not conducive for a free and fair election. He should be prevented from doing that.

Then only way to salvage the death of hope in the Maldives is to condemn the transfer of power in this country and ensure election not later than six months.

Religious Freedom Takes Further Beating in Maldives

October 25, 2011

The Indian Ocean archipelago of Maldives recently enforced a law that was introduced by former dictatorial President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom to bring religion under the government's control. The new regulations under this law put harsh restrictions on the freedom of religion and expression of both Maldivian citizens and expats.

The Protection of Religious Unity Act of 1994 seeks to unify the practice and preaching of Islam and to restrict practice and expression of any religion other than Islam. The new regulations under this Act were published in the government's gazette last month and thereby brought them into force.

According to *Compass Direct News*, police in Raa Atoll this month detained and deported a 30 year-old school teacher from India for possessing a Bible, showing the authorities' resolve to enforce the law.

One of the objectives behind the new regulations is to frustrate the calls for religious freedom by the international community.

The Maldives, an archipelago of 1,190 islands, claims that all its citizens – about 300,000 – are Sunni Muslim. Although many refute this claim, the country's constitution states that a non-Muslim cannot become a citizen of the Maldives.

The drafting of the regulations – agreed upon by 11 religious scholars, a police legal team, the President and three Attorneys General – was overseen by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, whose minister is a member of the conservative Adhaalath Party (also known as the Justice Party).

At its national meeting in July, the Justice Party – which seeks to emulate Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and advocates for Sharia law in the country – Islamic Affairs Minister Dr Abdul Majeed Abdul Bari urged the government to implement the Religious Unity regulations to address some of its concerns. He said insulting Islam and “every kind of sinful behavior forbidden in Islam” had become routine in the country. He also said foreign parties were “working tirelessly” to introduce freedom of religion in the Maldives. “We hear arguments of how non-Muslims should have the freedom to express their disbelief and how everyone should have the right to change religion.”

The new regulations seem to be part of a deal between the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Justice Party, a former ally of the coalition government. The Justice Party broke away from the MDP-led ruling coalition days after the Religious Unity regulations were published. The conservative party, citing one of the reasons for parting way, alleged that the government amended the draft regulations before publishing them. Though highly repressive, the regulations are being seen as liberal by some conservative Muslims.

As per the regulations, permission from the government is mandatory for delivery of Islamic sermons and lectures and dissemination of information on Islamic principles. These sermons,

lectures or literature must not contradict Islam or general agreement reached among Islamic scholars or the Quran or the Sunnah or the Hadith.

The regulations also ban preaching of other religions. “It is illegal in the Maldives to propagate any faith other than Islam or to engage in any effort to convert anyone to any religion other than Islam. It is also illegal to display in public any symbols or slogans belonging to any religion other than Islam, or creating interest in such articles.”

It is also illegal in the Maldives “to carry or display in public books on other religions (other than Islam) and books and writings that promote and propagate other religions, and the translation into Dhivehi language such books and writings on other religions,” the regulations state.

Another clause says, “It is illegal for non-Muslims living in the Maldives and non-Muslims visiting the Maldives to express their religious slogans in a way such action is carried out widely in public, and conducting such religious activities by forming groups and conducting such activities in public places and engaging any Maldivian in their activities of such kind.” Yet another clause states, “It is illegal to possess, distribute or publicize programs, writings, artworks and advertisements on religions other than Islam.”

The penalty for violating the rules is two to five years of imprisonment for Maldivians, and foreigner who violate it, “shall be handed over to the Department of Immigration and Emigration for deportation.”

When Mohamed Nasheed became the president of the Maldives in 2008, there were hopes that former President Gayoom’s policy of religious restrictions would be eased. On the contrary, Nasheed’s government is seemingly reinforcing it.

During his presidency, Gayoom, leader of the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party, or DRP, engineered the country’s identity as a 100 percent Muslim but liberal nation and promoted a government’s version of Islam during the 30 years of his rule. Gayoom cracked down on Christian expats on suspicion of missionary work and deported them. He also imprisoned a few local converts. Using Islamic nationalism, he sought to justify his autocratic rule.

Gayoom’s successor President Nasheed is apparently a progressive Muslim. But the opposition DRP and its allies have majority in the parliament and they veto Nasheed’s attempts to deviate from conservative policies. The country’s bureaucracy and independent institutions are also highly politicized to this day thanks to Gayoom’s handpicked officials many of who remain in office.

The Gayoom-infused exclusive Islamic identity, which was propagated through government-controlled media for decades, has become part of the psyche of many Maldivians. During the democracy movement to overthrow Gayoom’s authoritarian regime, many Maldivians feared that democracy could cost their nation its Islamic identity.

Even after the arrival of multi-party democracy, measures like sending Maldivian troops to the United Nation-led peacekeeping operations to conflict zones, inviting doctors from Israel, and civil rights are seen as anti-Islamic.

Now with the implementation of the repressive Religious Unity Act, the country has moved further away from religious freedom reforms.

This will harm the Maldives' international reputation and tourism industry, and hurt the country's youth in particular. There have been instances of suicides by, and persecution of, Maldivians who have gone public about their disbelief in Islam. Crime and violence are also rising.

The stifling of essential human freedoms is incompatible with both true Islam and liberal democracy. The falsehood of a "100 percent Muslim but liberal democracy" will not cut ice, at least with the international community.

Why Bhutan Wants Anti-Conversion Law?

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Bhutan, a tiny Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas in South Asia, will soon have a law providing for imprisonment of three years for “proselytization.” Last week, the parliament of Bhutan approved inclusion of a new provision in the Penal Code to ban religious conversions by force or allurement – emulation of the “anti-conversion” laws in force in some Indian states. While some provisions in the amendment bill are yet to be discussed in a joint-session of Bhutan’s bicameral parliament – the National Council and the National Assembly – the “proselytization” clause has been endorsed by both houses, local newspapers say.

Another significant development is expected in Bhutan, which was one of the world’s most isolated nations until recent years. The government may soon give legal status to Christianity, which has existed as an underground movement, especially among the Lhotshampas (as the ethnic Nepalese from south Bhutan are called), for the last few decades. It is estimated that 6,000 of the 700,000 people in Bhutan are Christian. The government has indicated that the country’s religious organizations’ regulatory authority is contemplating registration of a Christian federation. While the move may be aimed at bringing Christians under the government regulation, it will have some benefits, too. Christians will have to be allowed to build churches, start printing of the Bible and other Christian literature, open Christian book stores, and so on.

The subtext of these two simultaneous developments reflects the predicament of Bhutan, which had its first democratic elections and became a constitutional monarchy two years ago. Bhutan’s king and political leaders seemingly want to give rights to its people, but fear that doing so may sacrifice their country’s two key interests, i.e. preservation of its distinct culture and maintenance of law and order. In relation to religious freedom, Christianity can be allowed to co-exist with Buddhism only if its adherents remain culturally compliant and maintain public order.

The Constitution of Bhutan, an absolute monarchy for around 100 years until 2008, provides for religious freedom, but it also mandates the government and its institutions to protect Buddhism, the country’s “spiritual heritage” and author of its unique culture. While in most democracies religious freedom is subject to public order and morality, in Bhutan it is subordinate also to protection and preservation of culture.

The stress on preservation of religion and culture in Bhutan is for both religious and political reasons.

In Bhutan, Vajrayana Buddhism is practised. It is part of the Mahayana denomination, one of the two broad classifications of the religion, apart from Hinayana or Theravada Buddhism. Globally, the Theravada sect is in majority. And Vajrayana Buddhism is seen as an “endangered” sect by its adherents. So the political and religious leaders of Bhutan are expected to protect and preserve their religious heritage.

Additionally – and more importantly – Bhutan needs to protect Buddhism for geopolitical reasons.

It is a “tiny nation between two giants, India and China,” as Bhutan’s political leaders often describe their fear. They also take pride in the fact that their ancestors did not allow the nation to be colonized by outsiders, and they believe that Bhutan’s religion and culture protected its sovereignty.

Bhutan’s fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, famously explained the reason behind the stress on preservation of religion and culture in Bhutan. “Being a small country, we do not have economic power. We do not have military muscle. We cannot play a dominant international role, because of our small size and population and because we are a landlocked country. The only factor we can fall back on ... which can strengthen Bhutan’s sovereignty and our different identity is the unique culture we have.” In other words, Bhutan needs to be visibly different in culture from its neighbours, India and China, to assert its sovereignty.

This is why until today Bhutan has preserved its distinct, uniform culture. All the buildings in the country conform to the signature Bhutanese architecture and the Bhutanese citizens are required to wear the national dress – knee-length robes, known as the *gho*, for men, and the ankle-length *kira* for women – at work and at public functions.

The use of distinct culture as the guardian of the nation’s sovereignty is also reflected in the clubbing of home and culture as one ministry. Bhutan’s minister in-charge of national security is also responsible for the preservation of culture.

Given that Bhutan perceives a constant threat to its sovereignty, its leaders fear that even a minor law and order problem or any people’s movement can be exploited by a foreign force. This is why authorities in Bhutan have not allowed labor unions or pressure groups or political activism.

The “invasion” of two neighboring Buddhist nations, Sikkim and Tibet, by outside forces cemented Bhutan’s suspicion. While China gained control over Tibet in 1950, India incorporated Sikkim, a Buddhist kingdom, in 1975. Bhutan alone remained untouched. But the nation’s leaders did not take it for granted. They intensified cultural unification through the “One Nation, One People” programme in the late 1970s.

The unification exercise involved the use of one language, Dzongkha, in education, apart from other measures. But Bhutan’s ethnic Nepalese population, mostly Hindu, rebelled against the kingdom, which over-reacted and used brutal force to quell their protests compelling around 100,000 ethnic Nepalese to seek refuge in Nepal. Many of them are still in refugee camps in Jhapa in Nepal – a monument to Bhutan’s violation of human rights.

The government of Bhutan needs to be apprised that a nation that is driven by gross national happiness must not practise repression.

Studies have shown that the enactment of anti-conversion laws in India has resulted in communal violence rather than preventing it. The possibility of the misuse of the anti-conversion provision in Bhutan is also high because the Hindu rightwing *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (based in India) is planning to open a chapter – though under a different name – in Bhutan. Given that a majority of Christians in Bhutan are ethnic Nepalese, the VHP will create

frictions between Nepalese Hindus and Nepalese Christians. Therefore, the government of Bhutan will need to ensure that any such attempt is nipped in the bud.

Also, incidents like the recent sentencing of a Christian man, Prem Singh Gurung, from Bhutan's Sarpang District to three-year imprisonment for showing a Jesus film will harm Bhutan's otherwise good international reputation. (Since Gurung's conviction for "attempting to promote civil unrest" was seemingly frivolous, an appeal in a higher court could have reversed the order – but it had to be done within 10 days after the judgment was passed, as per the Civil and Criminal Procedure Code of Bhutan.)

Being a landlocked, mountainous nation, Bhutan (India's former protectorate) depends on aid from New Delhi, which competes with China for influence in South Asia. Bhutan's leaders privately admit that they are weary of their dependence on India. And, quietly, they are striving for economic independence and to establish ties with Western nations.

Gradually, Bhutan is gaining self-confidence. For example, in April 2010, it hosted a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit. Besides, Prime Minister Lyonchen Jigme Thinley is often on official visits abroad or hosting foreign delegates in Thimphu.

Bhutan's king and political leaders are generally known for being simple and sincere – which sets them apart from their counterparts in other South Asian nations. So true to their reputation, they should be asked to provide religious and other freedoms to all the people of their country and explained why there is little reason to continue to feel anxious about their sovereignty.

World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) sponsors the WEA-RLC Research & Analysis Report to help individuals and groups pray for and act on religious liberty issues around the world. WEA has a consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council.

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