

At-a-Glance findings

Religious Freedom in the World Report - 2014

(Period under review: October 2012 to June 2014)

1. Of the 196 countries in the world, 81 countries – or 41 percent – are identified as places where religious freedom is impaired (classified as “high” or “medium”) or is in decline.
2. A total of 35 countries – or 18 percent – were classified as having some religious freedom issues that are “of concern”, but with no deterioration in their status.
3. The remaining 80 countries – or 41 percent – indicated no concerns regarding religious freedom. The report found no regular or systemic religious freedom violations in these nations.
4. Where there has been a change concerning religious freedom, that change has almost always been for the worse. In the 196 countries analysed, change for the better is noted in only six countries. Deteriorating conditions are recorded in 55 countries (or 28 percent).
5. Even in the six countries where some improvements have been noted, four – Iran, United Arab Emirates, Cuba and Qatar – remain classified as places of “high” or “medium” persecution. Zimbabwe and Taiwan are classified “of concern” and “low” respectively.
6. In total, 20 countries are designated as “high” with regard to lack of religious freedom.
 - a. Of these, 14 experience religious persecution linked to extremist Islam. These are: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Maldives, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.
 - b. In the remaining six countries, religious persecution is linked to authoritarian regimes. These are: Burma (Myanmar), China, Eritrea, North Korea, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

Based on these findings, the Report concludes:

7. In the period under review, global religious freedom entered a period of serious decline.
8. The impression given by global media headlines of a rising tide of persecution aimed at marginalised religious communities is supported by this research.
9. Muslim countries predominate in the list of states with the most serious religious freedom violations.
10. Religious freedom is in decline in Western countries that are predominantly or historically Christian. Two principal factors explain this. First, there is disagreement over the role to be played by religion in the ‘public square’. Second, openness to religious freedom is under threat from increasing societal concern about extremism.

11. Christians remain the most persecuted religious minority, due partly to their wide geographic spread and high relative numbers. However, Muslims are also experiencing a serious degree of persecution and discrimination, both at the hands of other Muslims and from authoritarian governments.
12. Jews in Western Europe are subject to violence and other abuse that is generally low-level. However, such problems have grown, prompting increased emigration to Israel.
13. Some positive signs of religious co-operation were identified, but these were often the result of local initiatives rather than progress at a national level.
14. The persecution of long-established religious minorities, and the rise of mono-confessional states, is resulting in exceptionally high population displacements that contribute to the worldwide refugee crisis.
15. The countries of Western Europe, which until recent decades were overwhelmingly Christian and racially homogenous, are becoming more like the multi-confessional and diverse societies of the Middle East. This is generating tensions, both political and social.
16. The rise of “religious illiteracy” among both Western policy makers and the international media is hampering productive dialogue and effective policy making.
17. We conclude that, to reverse the disturbing trends identified in this Report, responsibility for combatting violence and persecution rests, first and foremost, within religious communities themselves. The necessity for all religious leaders to loudly proclaim their opposition to religiously-inspired violence, and to re-affirm their support for religious tolerance, is becoming ever more urgent.

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