

Religious Freedom in Asia

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Asia continues to be the continent where religious freedom is violated the most. Except for countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines (apart from some episodes in Mindanao), and Cambodia, all other countries report varying degrees of violations to the religious freedom of Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities, not to mention groups deemed “heretical” by local majorities including Ahmadis and Sufis.

Top prize for the country with the most violations, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, goes to North Korea, a place where professing any faith other than that of the ruling demi-gods from the Kim dynasty is banned. The small groups the regime presents to diplomatic missions as a token of its respect for religions (in particular its so-called “Catholic” and “Protestant” groups) seem to be players in a show rather than people who lead an actual religious life.

China on the other hand is the country where controls over religion are the most methodical and virtually complete, as evidenced by the violent campaign against unofficial Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Muslim communities.

In countries with a majority religion, minorities already see themselves as socially marginalised because employment opportunities, welfare assistance, social networking are almost inevitably shaped by ethno-religious ties.

One thing that is clearly growing is fundamentalism, not only Muslim fundamentalism (most covered in the media), but also Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalisms, as clearly seen in the latest incidents over the past year in Burma (Myanmar) and Sri Lanka. Economic crises (whereby “others” are seen as a threat to one’s well-being), globalisation and the growth of secularism in the cities are among the main reasons for this trend, as people fear the possible disappearance of their religion in favour of modernity or other religions.

Governments often back fundamentalism as they fail to uphold the law and protect freedom, even when it is enshrined in their constitutions (for example, Indonesia). Much more often, politicians take advantage of fundamentalism to increase their electoral base, exploiting the issue of religion at the expense of their opponents. This is the case in India (with the Bharatiya Janata Party), Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Anti-conversion laws in India, Pakistan’s blasphemy law, Bangladesh’s failure to curb violence and injustice clearly exemplify the complicity between state and religious fanatics.

In atheist (Communist) nations such as China and Vietnam, patriotism plays the role of fundamentalism. In China, Christians, Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists are not persecuted for ideological reasons, but because they “disturb public order”, they “threaten the good of society”, or undermine the country’s wealth or honour.

Moreover, due to the global economic crisis, policy errors, social ills (the gap rich between poor, pollution, unemployment, poor health care, etc.) governments feel vulnerable and exposed, which leads them to take hard-line positions and look for scapegoats.

Another trend that should be recognised is the disappearance of human rights and religious freedom from diplomatic talks, now reduced to a simple instrument for the signing of commercial contracts. China, Russia, Vietnam – to name just some examples – have boosted their international ties despite their daily violations of human rights and religious freedom. The Western world is no longer the defender of those rights (if it ever was).

East and West are equally obtuse because they fail to understand that violations of religious freedom not only creates victims (and martyrs), but are the standard to measure how much a society can grow in harmony and prosperity for all. Without religious freedom, all rights are humiliated and societies are at risk of implosion or war.

Note

This analysis forms part of Aid to the Church in Need's *Religious Freedom in the World Report – 2014*. To view the report in full please visit: www.religion-freedom-report.org