

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

The Persecution of Christians in China, Egypt, India, Iran, Nigeria and Pakistan in the context of their governments' international human rights commitments



A briefing document prepared for the
Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade
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COVER IMAGE: Top Row (left – right): Bishoy Armia Boulous (Christian prisoner in Egypt), Nimai Rabha (Beaten during attack on church in India), Asia Bibi (Christian prisoner in Pakistan).

Bottom Row (left – right): Farshid Fathi (Christian prisoner in Iran), Chibok schoolgirls (Abducted in Nigeria), Alimujiang Yimiti (Christian prisoner in China).

Church in Chains is an independent Irish charity that encourages prayer and action in support of persecuted Christians worldwide. It is a member of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade NGO Standing Committee on Human Rights.

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“ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS”

Introduction

This briefing has been prepared by Church in Chains in response to feedback received from members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade on 13 May 2015, when Church in Chains together with Bishop John McAreavey, Trócaire and Open Doors made presentations to the committee on the topic of "Persecution of Christians Worldwide".

Several committee members responding to the debate expressed the view that it would be useful to have a list of national and international commitments to which governments of persecuting countries have signed up, together with a list of individual cases of persecution of Christians, with a view to inviting the ambassadors of these countries to appear before the committee.

Methodology

The briefing covers China, Egypt, India, Iran, Nigeria and Pakistan – each of which has an embassy in Dublin.

Several other countries about which there are grave concerns about religious freedom – including Eritrea, North Korea, Uzbekistan and Vietnam – are not included because they do not have embassies in Ireland.

Saudi Arabia has been excluded on the basis that it has not signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights nor the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Each country entry begins with a brief overview of the religious freedom situation and continues with sections on international commitments; national constitution/legal system; main religious freedom issues in the country; individual cases of Christian persecution; UN concerns about religious freedom in the country; other religious groups facing persecution, before concluding with three suggested questions to be put to ambassadors.

Persecution Category Definitions

Severe Many or all Christians in such countries face persecution. State persecution includes the use of blasphemy laws and apostasy laws, arrests, fines, imprisonment, torture and execution. Persecution by society includes abduction, murder and violent mob attacks (including bombings, shootings and arson).

Significant Some, but not all, Christians in such countries face many restrictions on practising their faith. State persecution may include arrests, fines, imprisonment, restrictions on church registration and prohibitions on meetings and possessing Bibles. Persecution by society includes attacks on pastors and churches.

CHINA

 A map of China and its surrounding regions, including parts of Russia, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Burma, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Tibet are marked.	Population: 1.35 billion
	Majority Religion: Non-Religious (44%)
	Christian population: 100 million (estimated)
	Persecution Category: Significant

The People's Republic of China is the world's most populous country and the world's second-largest economy. There are five officially recognised religious faiths in China, regulated and strictly controlled by the State Administration for Religious Affairs. They are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestant Christianity (the Three-Self Patriotic Movement or TSPM) and Catholicism (the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association or CCPA).

Government control over religion can be seen in the decades-long struggle in Tibet over the leadership of the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader who is campaigning for autonomy within China; the long-running dispute with the Vatican over the appointment of Roman Catholic bishops; and in the brutal ongoing crackdown on the Falun Gong movement.

International Commitments

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Accepted by the People's Republic of China when it joined United Nations in 1971, replacing the Republic of China which had been one of the original signatories of the Declaration in 1948.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Signed in 1998 but not yet ratified.

National Constitution/Legal System

Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China of 1982 specifies that: *"Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organisation or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination."* Constitutional protection is extended only to what are called "normal religious activities," generally understood to refer to religions that submit to state control via the State Administration for Religious Affairs.

CHINA

Main Religious Freedom Issues

- Ongoing government campaigns at central, provincial and local level to combat “illegal religious activity” (understood as any religious activity which is not explicitly approved by the State).
- Imprisonment of Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Falun Gong practitioners, Catholic and Protestant Christians.
- Zhejiang State Government Campaign (2013 to date) in which crosses have been removed from over 1,200 church buildings and over 35 buildings have been completely destroyed.

Christians facing Persecution

In 2014, 572 cases of persecution of Christians were recorded by China Aid. These cases involved 17,884 people, of whom 1,592 were church leaders. 2,994 people were detained by Chinese police and 1,274 people received sentences (fines/imprisonments).

Alimujiang Yimiti (40) is a Uighur Christian from Xinjiang province in north-west China. He was arrested in January 2008 and is serving a 15-year sentence for "*instigating separatism and revealing state secrets*". It is believed that the reason for Alimujiang's imprisonment is his Christian faith and witness. He is married to Guli Nuer and they have two young sons.

Zhang Shaojie (49) is pastor of Nanle County Christian Church in central China. He was arrested in November 2013 after a dispute over church land with Communist Party officials. In July 2014, he was sentenced to twelve years in prison. Officials have threatened his family, including his elderly parents. One daughter was imprisoned for ten days in November 2014, and another had to flee the country with her husband and baby.

Shouwang Church is one of Beijing's largest house churches, with about 1,000 members. Since April 2011 the church has had to hold outdoor services, following a series of evictions from rented premises and the withholding of keys to a property the members had bought. Each week many members are arrested – hundreds have been detained in police stations for periods up to 48 hours, and many have been placed under temporary house arrest. The church pastor, Jin Tianming, has been under house arrest since April 2011.

UN Concerns

China did not accept a recommendation at its Universal Periodic Review in October 2013 which stated: "*Stop the prosecution and persecution of people for the practice of their religion or belief including Catholics, other Christians, Tibetans, Uighurs, and Falun Gong, and set a date for the visit of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.*"

China's response to the recommendation stated: "*China's Constitution and laws guarantee citizens' freedom of religious belief, and, at the same time, stipulate obligations that citizens must fulfill. The Chinese government handles in accordance with the law illegal religious organisations and individuals that promote superstition and fallacies, deceive the people, instigate and create disturbances, and undermine social stability. 'Falun Gong' is not a religion but an out-and-out cult. The purpose of banning 'Falun Gong' by the Chinese government in accordance with the law is to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms of citizens, and uphold the sanctity of the Constitution and laws.*"

CHINA

Other Religious Groups facing Persecution

Tibetan Buddhists: Strict government control of monasteries in Tibet including "*patriotic re-education*". Detention (described as "*protective custody*") of the Panchen Lama (second-highest ranking Buddhist leader) since the age of six. Imprisonment of several Buddhist leaders.

Uighur Muslims: Severe crackdown on Muslims in Xinjiang Province (including prohibition of observance of Ramadan and the wearing of beards). Chinese government claims its measures to be targeting separatism and extremism but the Uighur community finds itself increasingly marginalised in a province that used to be populated primarily by them. Many Uighur Muslims imprisoned.

Falun Gong: Persecution of the Falun Gong movement is based on the Chinese policies to ban groups that are considered "*evil cults*". About 2000 people are detained in re-education centres because of their religion or belief, and about 500 Falun Gong members are serving prison sentences

Three Suggested Questions for the Chinese Ambassador

1. When will China permit the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to visit the country?
2. Why does the government continue to cover up religious persecution by fabricating serious criminal charges against internationally-recognised prisoners of conscience such as Alimujiang Yimiti and Zhang Shaojie?
3. If China guarantees freedom of religion or belief, why have Zhejiang State authorities demolished over 35 church buildings and removed crosses from over 1,200 church buildings in the past year?

EGYPT

	<p>Population: 85 million</p> <p>Majority Religion: Islam (90%)</p> <p>Christian population: 8.5 million</p> <p>Persecution Category: Significant</p>
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Egypt has been in turmoil since the January Revolution of 2011, which forced the resignation of long-time President Hosni Mubarak. His successor President Mohammed Morsi remained in office only a year – he was ousted by the army in July 2013, after weeks of mass protests against his rule. The current President, General Abdel al-Sisi, was elected in May 2014.

A new constitution was approved in January 2014, which was seen as being more inclusive of Christians, especially the historic Coptic Church. Most Egyptian Christians belong to the Coptic Church, but there has been a marked growth in recent years in the number of Christians from a Muslim background, and the Cairo church Kasr El Dobra is the largest evangelical church in the Middle East. Christians face restrictions and sometimes, especially in recent years, violent attacks.

International Commitments

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Egypt was one of the original signatories of the Declaration in 1948.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Signed in 1967 and ratified in 1982.

Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam: Signed in 1990 by Egypt and other members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. It provides an overview of the Islamic perspective on human rights, and affirms Islamic Sharia as its sole source. Its declared purpose is to be "*general guidance for Member States [of the OIC] in the field of human rights*".

National Constitution/Legal System

Article 64 of the 2014 Constitution states: "*Freedom of belief is absolute. The freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing places of worship for the followers of revealed religions is a right organised by law.*" The Preamble of the Constitution states that it is "*in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which we took part in the drafting of and approved*".

However, religious freedom is limited by the fact that Sharia law can override national law. Article 2 of the constitution establishes Islam as the state religion and Sharia as "*the source of legislation*", which, by definition, denies the right of individuals to leave Islam and choose another religion.

EGYPT

Main Religious Freedom Issues

- The prohibition on converting from Islam to Christianity.
- Need for greater protection of Christian minorities in Upper Egypt.
- Abduction and forced conversion/marriage of teenage Christian girls.
- Great difficulties faced in obtaining permission to build or repair churches.

Christians facing Persecution

The ousting of President Morsi, the election of President al-Sisi and the adoption of the 2014 constitution are all viewed positively by Christians living in the major cities of Cairo and Alexandria, where greater protection has been given to churches. However, outside the big cities, in Upper Egypt Christians continue to experience attacks on homes and businesses, and the abduction of teenage Christian girls by Muslim men remains a large problem. Christians protest that the police fail to act when such kidnappings are reported.

Bishoy Armia Boulous (33) is a Christian journalist who was arrested in December 2013, while reporting on Christians being persecuted in southern Egypt. He was put in prison, where the guards refused to let him have a Bible. Bishoy, formerly known as Mohammed Hegazy, has been seeking to register his conversion from Islam to Christianity since 2007. His wife Christine and their two children had to leave Egypt because of threats and attacks. In June 2015, his lawyer stated that he was being beaten regularly in prison.

Al-Our village, Minya Province: In March 2015, at least seven Coptic Christians were injured, three seriously, when an armed mob stormed a church in Al-Our village, home to 13 of the Copts beheaded by Islamic State in Libya. The extremists' anger had been sparked by President al-Sisi's promise of a new church building in Al-Our to commemorate the 13 martyrs.

UN Concerns

Egypt was widely criticised at its Universal Periodic Review in November 2014 for violating "*freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association [and] depriving thousands of Egyptians of fair trial guarantees*". Other member states urged Egypt to free political prisoners and investigate alleged abuses by security forces. Many of the criticisms were based on the fact that President al-Sisi outlawed the pro-Morsi Muslim Brotherhood and suppressed media freedoms and public protests.

Egypt's deputy Foreign Minister Hesham Badr rejected the claims, stating that Egypt's government had made efforts to institute reforms. He questioned whether some delegations were "*dealing with conditions in a country other than Egypt in which we live*".

EGYPT

Other Religious Groups facing Persecution

Bahai's: the Baha'i faith is not recognised as a "heavenly religion" in the Egyptian constitution. In January 2015, Egypt's Ministry of Endowments organised a workshop to "raise awareness" amongst imams of the "growing dangers of the spread of Baha'ism".

Shia Muslims: In May 2015, police raided the flat of Al-Taher Al-Hashimy in Cairo, arresting him and confiscating books that allegedly aim to promote Shia Islam in the Sunni-dominated country.

Atheists: In January 2015, 21-year-old engineering student Karim Al-Banna was arrested on charges of being an atheist and "insulting Islam" on Facebook. He faces a three-year prison sentence.

Three Suggested Questions for the Egyptian Ambassador

1. When will Egypt facilitate, in its civil procedures, citizens who wish to exercise their right to change religion – specifically to leave Islam for Christianity?
2. What action will the Egyptian government take to prevent the ongoing abduction, forced conversion and marriage of teenage Christian girls?
3. Why is Bishoy Armia Boulous denied a Bible and subjected to beatings in prison and when will he be released?

INDIA

	<p>Population: 1.3 billion</p> <p>Majority Religion: Hinduism (74%)</p> <p>Christian population: 71 million</p> <p>Persecution Category: Significant</p>
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Christians enjoy freedom in much of the Republic of India, but in some areas they face persecution. In recent years religious intolerance has grown with the rise of *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalism). Its followers use the slogan "One Nation, One Religion, One Culture", and consider Christians and Muslims to be followers of foreign religions. *Hindutva* violence against Christians includes burning church buildings, destroying property and violent attacks that leave Christians seriously injured or dead. Typically, intruders break up church services, beat the worshippers and call the police to arrest the Christians on false charges of "forcible conversion". The police rarely arrest the attackers.

"Anti-conversion laws" are often used as an excuse to raid church services and harass Christians. The laws forbid conversion by "force, fraud or allurement" and have been implemented in five states. It is claimed that they are intended to deal with inter-religious tension, but they lead to increased violence against Christians and are not used to stop extremist attempts to coerce Christians to become Hindus.

International Commitments

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: India was one of the original signatories of the Declaration in 1948.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: India acceded in 1979.

National Constitution/Legal System

Article 25 grants to citizens of India of all religious persuasions freedom to profess, practise and propagate their faith in a way that does not disrupt public order and does not affect public health and morality adversely.

Anti-conversion laws are promulgated on the false premise that forced or induced conversions happen and need to be prevented. Such laws are controversial because they run the risk of being abused by communal forces which may have the tacit approval of the dominant political party in the state. Prior to the election of the Hindu nationalist BJP in 2014, it pledged to introduce a nationwide anti-conversion law but this has not yet been introduced – possibly due to the fact that the BJP does not have a majority in the Upper House.

INDIA

Main Religious Freedom Issues

- Growing number of violent attacks by Hindu extremists against Christian and Muslim minorities.
- Discrimination against Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam.
- Anti-conversion laws.
- Lack of government action to protect religious minorities.

Christians facing Persecution

The Evangelical Fellowship of India reported that in 2014 there were at least 147 cases of persecution against Christians in India. Physical violence made up 24 percent of cases, while 54 percent of cases involved threats, intimidation and coercion, often with police looking on. Violence against Christian women constituted 11 percent of cases.

The state with the highest number of incidents was **Chhattisgarh** with 28, followed by neighbouring **Madhya Pradesh** with 26 and **Uttar Pradesh** with 18. The new state of **Telangana**, carved out of Andhra Pradesh, registered 15 cases. At least two Christians were killed for their faith, one in **Odisha** state and the other in **Andhra Pradesh**.

In a statement accompanying the report, EFI leaders said: "*Violence against Christians... continues today as vicious hate campaigns, physical violence, police complicity and state impunity contribute to the persecution of the Christian community in many states of India.*" They added that much of the violence has taken place since the new government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi came into power in May 2014. Mr Modi's government is headed by the Hindu nationalist BJP. Attacks have continued on a weekly basis in 2015.

Nimai Rabha was one of fifteen Christians who were badly injured when a mob of about 100 Hindu extremists armed with swords, bamboo sticks and stones attacked church members who were eating after a service on 17 April 2015. This attack took place in Amtola village, Golpara District, in Assam state in north-east India. At least 15 Christians were injured, many of them wounded on their heads and upper bodies.

EFI's Persecution Watch of 7 July 2015 listed attacks in **Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Kerala** and **Odisha** states. A nun was raped in one of the attacks, while a pastor was arrested and charged with hurting the sentiments of other religions, violating the Odisha Freedom of Religion Act 1967 and criminal intimidation. Churches, a school and a shrine were targeted in the attacks.

UN Concerns

In 2014, Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN's Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, expressed concerns about anti-conversion laws, stating that the laws place unreasonable restrictions not only on people's right to convert to another religion, but also their right to propagate their own religion. Following a visit to India to meet victims of sectarian violence (both Muslim and Christian), he stated: "*There is a continued climate of fear, and maybe that's even the purpose. The acts of violence are part of a broader pattern of instigating fear into the minorities, sending them a message they don't belong to this country unless they either keep at the margins or turn to Hinduism.*"

INDIA

Other Religious Groups facing Persecution

Muslims: Over 450 attacks on Muslims by Hindu extremists have been reported since Prime Minister Modi was elected in May 2014. There has been widespread criticism of police and government inaction to deal with the growing violence.

Three Suggested Questions for the Indian Ambassador

1. What action does the Indian government propose to halt the ongoing violent attacks by Hindu extremists against Christian and Muslim minorities?
2. When will the Indian government take steps to end the exclusion from government benefits of Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam?
3. Does the Indian government recognise that the existence of “anti-conversion” laws in five states is prejudicial to a free and inclusive society, leading to what the UN’s Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has described as a “continued climate of fear”?

IRAN

	<p>Population: 80 million</p> <p>Majority Religion: Islam (99%)</p> <p>Christian population: At least 385,000</p> <p>Persecution Category: Severe</p>
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Shi'a Islam is the state religion (Iran is 89% Shia and 10% Sunni) and President Rouhani is subject to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, and the historic churches (Armenian, Assyrian and Chaldean Orthodox) enjoy relative freedom. However, minority religions that are not recognised by the constitution are severely restricted and members often face harassment, arrest and torture. This applies especially to Christians from a Muslim background, Bahai and Sufi Muslims.

Most Christian activity is illegal, including evangelism, Bible training and publishing Christian books. The government is very concerned by the huge growth of house churches, viewing them as a threat to Islam because their members are mainly former Muslims. When a house church is discovered, the leaders are often arrested and tortured in an effort to track down all members. In prison, Christians are often beaten in an effort to make them recant their faith.

International Commitments

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Iran was one of the original signatories of the Declaration in 1948.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Signed in 1968 and ratified by Iran in 1975.

NOTE: Both of these commitments pre-date the 1979 Islamic Revolution but the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has not withdrawn from the commitments.

National Constitution/Legal System

The constitution recognises Armenian and Assyrian Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians as religious minorities, but they suffer discrimination and do not have the same rights as Shia Muslims. The constitution is based on the tenets of Shia Islam, and the *Vilayet-e Faqih* (the Shia ideal of the absolute guardianship of the Islamic Jurists), giving religious leaders control.

Conversion from Islam to any other religion is illegal. It is considered blasphemy and is punishable by death. In 2014, the government executed more than 20 people for blasphemy.

IRAN

Main Religious Freedom Issues

- Systematic persecution, including imprisonment and torture, of members of religious minorities including Baha'i, Christians and Sufi Muslims.
- Discrimination against religious minorities in areas such as education, employment and housing.
- Harassment of Christians from a Muslim background – including surveillance by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. Homes used for informal Christian gatherings are raided, property seized and Christians arrested and arbitrarily detained, without due process.

Christians facing Persecution

It is estimated that 92 Christians were in prison at the end of 2014, while at least a further 18 spent time in prison earlier in the year.

Saeed Abedini (35), a pastor who is a former Muslim, was born in Iran but moved to the US in 2005 after interrogations over his house church activities, and has US citizenship. He continued to visit Iran and was arrested in September 2012 while in Iran to build an orphanage. He was put in Evin prison in Tehran, and in January 2013 was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment for "threatening national security" by planting house churches. He has been subjected to solitary confinement and severely injured by beatings. In November 2013, Saeed was moved to the dangerous Rajai Shahr prison in Karaj, where he faces threats to his life.

Behnam Irani (43), a former Muslim from Karaj in northern Iran, has been a pastor since 2002. He has been arrested twice (in 2006 and 2010) because of his Christian activities and his house church has been raided – security officials interrogated those attending and confiscated Bibles, Christian literature and DVDs. He is serving a six-year sentence for holding house church services and is not due for permanent release until 2016. Behnam's health has deteriorated in prison, and in July 2012, he began vomiting blood and losing consciousness as a result of a chronic stomach ulcer. Eventually, in February 2014, he was taken to hospital for surgery. In July 2015, he was granted temporary release for 15 days.

Farshid Fathi (35), a former Muslim, is a house church leader who was arrested in Tehran in December 2010 and imprisoned in Evin prison in Tehran, where his imprisonment included nearly a year in solitary confinement. In April 2012, he was convicted of charges of "*acting against national security through membership of a Christian organisation, collection of funds, and propaganda against the Islamic Regime by helping spread Christianity in the country*" and was sentenced to six years' imprisonment. His wife and children had to leave Iran because of extreme pressure from Iranian intelligence. In July 2015 the authorities notified Farshid that he is due for early release in December 2015.

IRAN

UN Concerns

Dr Ahmed Shaheed has been the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran since 2011 and has repeatedly expressed grave concerns about religious freedom in Iran.

He has noted that *"Those who convert from, say, Islam to Christianity are targeted for persecution and those who proselytise or evangelise are targeted for persecution."*

He has also stated that even officially tolerated religious minorities such as Sunni Muslims, Christians (from the historic churches), Jews, Zoroastrians and Dervishes (Sufi ascetics) face serious restrictions regarding their rights and are subjected to numerous limitations of religious freedom including discrimination and persecution.

He has further stated that the legal framework in Iran is *"appropriated to harass, rather than protect religious minorities; restricting their religious practices and creating impediments to their education, freedom of expression, association, assembly, and to their economic opportunities"*.

Other Religious Groups facing Persecution

Baha'i: Baha'is are especially persecuted in Iran. Their faith is considered a political sect and Baha'is are deemed apostates by the government and denied civil rights. At least 734 Baha'is have been arrested since 2004 and there are currently 117 Baha'is in prison, all on false charges related solely to their religious belief, including seven Baha'i leaders serving 20-year sentences.

Sufi Muslims: Sufism is a mystical-ascetic aspect of Islam viewed as heretical by the authorities, who have placed increasing restrictions on places of worship. Hundreds of Sufis have been arrested in the past year, many of whom have been sentenced to imprisonment, fines and floggings.

Jews, Zoroastrians, Sunni Muslims and Atheists also face discrimination and persecution.

Three Suggested Questions for the Iranian Ambassador

1. If, as previously stated, one of the main goals of the government of President Rouhani is to remove obstacles and normalise relations with Europe, based on mutual respect and common interest, when will the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights be permitted to visit Iran?
2. What steps, if any, are proposed by the Iranian government to build confidence among the international community that human rights, including religious freedom, will be advanced in Iran?
3. Will the Iranian government consider early release – as has been promised to Farshid Fathi – in other cases such as Saeed Abedini and Behnam Irani?

NIGERIA



Population: 170 million

Majority Religion: Disputed – Muslim majority in north; Christian majority in south

Christian population: 85 million (estimated)

Persecution Category: Severe (in north)

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is Africa's most populous country. Nigeria is constitutionally secular, with freedom of religion. The population is divided between the mainly Muslim north and the mainly Christian south, with both sharing the volatile middle belt.

Christians living in the north experience discrimination and violent Islamist attacks, including house burning, abduction and the bombing and torching of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of churches. Thousands of Christians have died from the attacks of Boko Haram terrorists: more Christians have been martyred in northern Nigeria in recent years than anywhere else in the world.

International Commitments

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Nigeria did not exist as a nation when the Declaration was signed in 1948.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Nigeria ratified in 1993.

National Constitution/Legal System

The current Constitution of Nigeria, established in 1999, states that there will be no state religion, confirms freedom of religion, and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religious belief. Political parties are not permitted to associate themselves with religious symbols or connotations or to limit membership based on religion.

In practice, Sharia courts predominate in twelve of the northern states and parts of four other states, and a Sharia Court of Appeals maintains state oversight of their legal proceedings. Nigeria's Supreme Court has not yet ruled on the constitutionality of applying Sharia punishments in the twelve "Sharia states".

Section 204 of Nigeria's Criminal Code prohibits blasphemy with a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment on conviction. A Sharia court may treat blasphemy as deserving of several punishments up to, and including, execution.

NIGERIA

Main Religious Freedom Issues

- The ongoing violent campaign of Boko Haram.
- The existence of Sharia law in many northern states.
- Inability of government to protect its citizens (Muslim and Christian) from terrorist attack.

Persecution of Christians

Boko Haram: Boko Haram is an Islamist terrorist group founded in 2002 by Sheikh Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, capital of the northeastern state of Borno. Its name means "*Western education is forbidden*", and it aims to rid the country of Christianity and the federal system and bring it under strict Sharia law. Boko Haram promotes a version of Islam that forbids Muslims from taking part in any activity associated with Western society.

Christians, especially those living in north-eastern Nigeria where Boko Haram has declared a caliphate, have suffered greatly at the hands of the terrorists as they kill and destroy all in their way. In the town of Gwoza in summer 2014, over 178 churches were destroyed when Boko Haram took over the town.

Chibok Schoolgirls: In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped more than 270 schoolgirls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State. In May 2014, Boko Haram released a video confirming that they were holding the girls, most of whom are Christian, threatening to sell them as slaves and stating that the girls had "*converted to Islam*".

It is believed that the schoolgirls have been separated into several groups and are being held in the vast Sambisa forest (a 60,000 square km former game reserve), though attempts to locate them have been unsuccessful. Boko Haram has demanded that the Nigerian government release prisoners from its group in exchange for the schoolgirls.

Fulani Attacks: In central and northern Nigeria, Christians also face deadly raids by ethnic Fulani militants armed with machetes and guns. Plateau State, which is predominantly Christian, has seen much violence over the years, as the Muslim minority competes with Christians for fertile farmland. Thousands of Christians have died, homes have been burned and hundreds of churches have been destroyed. Christians in Plateau state have been accused of using violence, but they claim that they are defending themselves against attacks initiated by Muslims.

UN Concerns

During its Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council in October 2013, the review group recognised "*The overall security challenges faced by the country, including the widespread reports of torture and extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances*" and recommended that Nigeria "*continue efforts towards improving the friendly coexistence of different ethnic groups and to fight racism, discrimination and religious intolerance such as violence against Christian and other minorities*".

NIGERIA

Other Religious Groups facing Persecution

Thousands of Muslims in northern Nigeria have been killed by Boko Haram during its campaign of terror. They have been targeted for various reasons including loyalty to the government, non-acceptance of Boko Haram rule and opposition to its interpretation of Islam.

Three Suggested Questions for the Nigerian Ambassador

1. What is the federal government's strategy to deal with Boko Haram?
2. What actions, if any, is the federal government taking to enhance security in the central belt in Nigeria in the light of the continuing attacks by ethnic Fulani militants on Christian communities?
3. Does the federal government have any hope that the abducted Chibok schoolgirls can be rescued?

PAKISTAN



Population: 185 million

Majority Religion: Islam (96%)

Christian population: 4.5 million

Persecution Category: Severe

When the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was founded in 1947, religious freedom was protected, but a policy of Islamisation has led to discrimination against religious minorities. Sharia law has been increasingly applied, even to Christians and Hindus, especially in parts of the northwest where Islamist groups have control.

Pakistan has been gripped by political uncertainty and turmoil in recent years, with tension between progressive modernists and Muslim fundamentalists; minorities face the threat of extremist attacks.

International Commitments

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Pakistan was one of the original signatories of the Declaration in 1948.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Signed in 2008 and ratified in 2010.

Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam: Signed in 1990 by Pakistan and other members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. It provides an overview of the Islamic perspective on human rights, and affirms Islamic Sharia as its sole source. Its declared purpose is to be "*general guidance for Member States [of the OIC] in the field of human rights*".

National Constitution/Legal System

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the 1973 Constitution for individuals of various religions and religious sects. However this freedom is declared subject to "reasonable conditions". Islam is declared to be the state religion.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws cover offences such as defiling the Quran (life imprisonment) and defaming the prophet Mohammed (death penalty). They are easy to break unintentionally and are often misused to settle personal scores. Mullahs often incite local Muslims against alleged blasphemers.

In June 2015, it was announced that the government had finalised a draft bill, prepared by the interior ministry and vetted by the law ministry, to stop the misuse of the blasphemy laws. The draft bill, which proposes penalties for false accusers of blasphemy, is to be presented in parliament for approval. If enacted, the bill would not be an amendment to the blasphemy laws but would be used alongside them.

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Main Religious Freedom Issues

- The misuse of the blasphemy laws. Since 1986, more than 1,000 people have been accused under the blasphemy laws, with over 50% of the cases involving religious minorities. No one has been executed for blasphemy by the government, but extremists have murdered over 50 people on release (at least 15 of them Christians) and two judges.
- Sectarian violence against religious minority groups.
- Government inaction and/or complicity in the face of Muslim extremists.

Persecution of Christians

Asia Bibi: Asia Bibi (49) has been imprisoned since June 2009, when a fellow farm labourer falsely accused her of insulting the Prophet Mohammed. In November 2010, she was sentenced to death for blasphemy. In July 2015, the Supreme Court put a stay of execution on the death sentence pending a full appeal hearing. Several TDs and Senators have called for Ms Bibi's release and the Dáil called for the reform of Pakistan's blasphemy laws during a Topical Issues debate in 2012.

Attacks on churches: At least 17 people were killed and 80 injured when Islamist suicide bombers attacked two churches in Lahore during Sunday morning worship in March 2015. In the deadliest attack ever on Pakistan's Christians, at least 81 people were killed in 2013 when a Peshawar church was bombed in an attack claimed by the Pakistani Taliban.

Sectarian Mob Violence: Accusations of blasphemy can often lead to mob violence against Christian individuals and communities. In the most recent such attack, an Islamic cleric was taken into custody on 3 July 2015 for inciting a Muslim mob to try to kill a Christian couple for alleged desecration of the Quran. Hundreds of Muslims attacked Owais Qamar (35) and his wife Rukhsana after a neighbour complained that they were using a salvaged advertising sign inscribed with a Quranic verse as a sleeping mat. The incident took place in Makki village near Farooqabad in Sheikhupura District, about 80 kilometres northwest of Lahore.

UN Concerns

During its Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council in 2012, several countries made recommendations calling for the reform or repeal of the blasphemy laws. Pakistan's representative responded by stating *"that there was a misunderstanding that this law was used to target only minorities. The majority of cases registered under this section had been against Muslims. The Government had taken measures to prevent possible misuse or abuse of the blasphemy law. An independent judiciary, free media and vibrant civil society also provided an effective safeguard against any misuse of the blasphemy law."*

In 2014, Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN's Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, expressed concerns and called on Pakistan to adopt urgent measures to stop faith-based killings and ensure the security of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, whose faith is outlawed in the country.

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Other Religious Groups facing Persecution

Shia Muslims: For several years, Shia Muslims in Balochistan province have been subject to terrorist attacks by the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi terrorist group acting with apparent impunity. Throughout Pakistan, over 100 Shia Muslims have been killed in sectarian attacks in 2015, including 43 in an attack on a bus in Karachi in May. The attack was claimed by an Islamic State affiliate which celebrated it as a victory over apostates and infidels.

Ahmadiyya Muslims: The persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, numbering 5 million, has been particularly severe and systematic in Pakistan, which is the only state to have officially declared the Ahmadis non-Muslims. They are prohibited from self-identifying as Muslims, and their freedom of religion has been curtailed by a series of ordinances, acts and constitutional amendments.

Hindus: Many of the approximately 2 million Hindus in Pakistan are compelled to pay regular sums, as a type of ransom, to extortionists and local leaders in exchange for the physical security of their families. Hindus also complain about discrimination in work. The Hindu community suffers frequent attacks leading thousands of Hindus to emigrate in recent years.

Three suggested questions for the Pakistani Chargé d'affaires:

1. What steps, if any, is the government taking to address the long-standing major issue of the misuse of the blasphemy laws which has had such disastrous consequences for thousands of innocent citizens?
2. What action will the government take to ensure that Asia Bibi's Supreme Court appeal will be heard swiftly?
3. When will the government implement the 2014 Supreme Court order to provide adequate security for all places of worship (Christian leaders have blamed government inaction as a contributory factor to the deaths of Christians in recent attacks on churches)?

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