

Report: Usual suspects thwart religious liberty: China, Burma, North Korea and others

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The State Department's annual report on the status of religious freedom worldwide is out, and its chief villains have familiar faces. The report says China, Burma and North Korea remain among the world's most egregious and systematic violators of religious liberty.

Meanwhile, several nations with close ties to the United States—such as Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan and Israel—continue to repress their citizens' religious freedom either through overt legal oppression or through unequal enforcement of laws that, on paper, protect religious freedom.

Introducing the report at a State Department press conference December 18, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage noted that "all Americans stand united in our freedom of belief." The department in its fifth annual report "wanted to focus on the plight of people who are persecuted."

Highlighting five broad categories of ways in which nations suppress religious freedom, the report listed nations that exemplify each:

- Totalitarian or authoritarian regimes that attempt to control their citizens' religious belief or practice. Nations such as North Korea, Burma and Cuba continue to "regard some or all religious groups as enemies of the state because of the religion's content, the fact that the very practice of religion threatens the dominant ideology . . . , the ethnic character of a religious group or groups, or a mixture of all three."
- Governments that exhibit official hostility toward minority or unapproved religions. Countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, "while not necessarily determined to implement a program of control over minority religions, nevertheless are hostile to certain ones or to factions of religious groups identified as 'security

threats.”

- Governments that neglect in some cases to prevent discrimination against, or persecution of, minority religious groups. In states such as India, Egypt and Indonesia “governments have laws or policies to discourage religious discrimination and persecution but fail to act with sufficient consistency and vigor against violations of religious freedom by nongovernmental entities or local law-enforcement officials.”
- Nations with legislation or policies that single out specific religions for discrimination. Belarus, Israel and Russia are countries that “have implemented laws or regulations that favor certain religions and place others at a disadvantage.”
- Nations with otherwise robust democracies that officially stigmatize religious minorities by “wrongfully associating them with dangerous ‘cults’ or ‘sects.’” The report notes that government officials in many Western European nations—such as Belgium, France and Germany—have doggedly investigated minority groups such as Scientologists, even though their members or officials have not been found to have committed any crimes. *-Associated Baptist Press*