

Religious restraints rose for 2 billion, study says

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [September 6, 2011](#) issue

A third of the world—about 2.2 billion people—live in nations where restrictions on religion have substantially increased, according to a new report.

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life study, released August 9, also shows that intolerant countries are growing more hostile to religious freedom, and tolerant ones are becoming more accommodating.

"There seems to be somewhat of a polarization," particularly in countries with constitutional prohibitions against blasphemy, said Brian Grim, the primary researcher of the report. "When you have one set of restrictions in place then it's easier to add on."

Nations with the greatest increases in government religious restrictions, ranked from most to least populous, included Egypt, France, Algeria, Uganda and Malaysia. Among those nations where government restrictions declined, ranked from most to least populous, were Greece, Togo, Nicaragua, the Republic of Macedonia and Guinea-Bissau.

The report, culling data from 198 countries and territories from 2006 through 2009, also measured social hostility toward religious groups. North Korea, one of the most repressive regimes, could not be included for lack of reliable data.

Though researchers collected statistics before the Arab Spring, they said the report may shed light on this year's uprisings across the Middle East.

"It's indisputable that increasing levels of restriction were part of the overall context within which the uprisings took place," Grim said. "Whether they were the trigger or they were just part of this trend in societies is difficult to tease apart at this point."

As other reports on religious freedom have found, it is scarcest in the Middle East and North Africa. But Europe, the study noted, has the largest proportion of countries where social hostilities related to religion rose. In France, for example, women are barred by law from wearing face-covering veils.

More than other groups, Muslims and Christians suffered harassment based on their religion. But Pew researchers noted that together, these groups comprise more than half the world's population.

Smaller religious groups that suffered disproportionately, the study found, included Jews. Representing less than 1 percent of the world's people, Jews were harassed in 75 countries.

Overall, about 70 percent of the world lives in nations with significant religious repression—a figure that matched that of a similar study Pew undertook two years ago. But the nations in which religious repression is increasing tend to be populous, the study's authors noted. —RNS