

U.S. commission cites religious freedom abuses, but India rejects findings

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Religious freedom remains under “serious and sustained assault” around the globe, according to the recently released annual report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

“The incarceration of prisoners of conscience, including religious prisoners, remains astonishingly widespread,” said Robert P. George, chairman of the independent government advisory body.

He pointed to China, which has imprisoned some opposed to a state campaign to remove crosses from churches, and Iran’s majority-Shi’ite regime, where Sunnis, Christians, and Bahá’ís have been persecuted, imprisoned, and even sentenced to death on dubious charges. And in Pakistan more people are on death row or serving life sentences for blasphemy charges than in any other nation in the world.

The report recommended that the State Department add the Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, and Vietnam to the U.S. government’s list of the world’s worst abusers of human rights and religious freedom. Of the 17 countries USCIRF says are of “particular concern,” only ten have been recognized by the State Department.

The official list remained unchanged for nearly a decade until the addition of Tajikistan, where a 2009 law allows the government to crack down on “all religious activity independent of state control,” particularly that of Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Officials there use concerns about extremism to justify monitoring and suppressing acts of worship. In the past year, police forced thousands of women to remove their headscarves and detained hundreds of thousands of bearded men.

“I don’t think we can account for everything we’ve seen simply by reference to the refugee crisis in the Middle East,” George said, noting oppressive conditions for

minorities in East Asia, where a Vietnamese religious freedom activist was imprisoned the day after meeting with a USCIRF ambassador. “The American public needs to understand that this is truly a battle for ideas. Protecting our interests really does mean advancing our values, including our belief in religious freedom.”

Good news was scarce, but there are hopeful signs. Last year’s report commended Cyprus and Sri Lanka for progress in promoting religious freedom and harmony. This year they were no longer on the USCIRF’s list of countries of particular concern.

Other areas of focus included rising anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim bigotry throughout Europe, the continuing persecution of Burma’s Rohingya Muslims, and the “negative trajectory” for Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs living in India—the world’s most populous democracy. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s rhetoric has been positive in the Hindu-majority country, a USCIRF delegation was effectively denied visas in March.

Leaders of India’s Christian and Muslim minorities welcomed the findings of the report, while government officials rejected it.

Vikas Swarup, a foreign ministry spokesman, said the report “fails to show proper understanding of India, its constitution, and its society.”

USCIRF designated India as a tier 2 country—not among the worst offenders, but a “country of particular concern.” The report mentions a ban on cow slaughter in some states, forced conversions by Hindu groups, and problems of police bias and judicial inaction. There is “a pervasive climate of impunity, where religious minority communities feel increasingly insecure, with no recourse when religiously motivated crimes occur.”

John Dayal, spokesman of the United Christian Forum for Human Rights, criticized the government for rejecting international scrutiny of its human rights record.

Maulana Salim Engineer, secretary-general of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, India’s largest Islamic organization, said the government is encouraging Hindu extremist groups by rejecting the report.

“These fascist elements are trying to demolish the pluralistic structure of secular India; by not acting against these fascist elements and rejecting the USCIRF report the government is destabilizing the foundation of Indian democracy and tarnishing

the country's image internationally," he said. "The Indian government should take corrective actions instead of denying the truth revealed by this U.S. commission report." —Religion News Service

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