

A Global Review of the Denial of Religious Freedom
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Bangladesh: New IARF Chapter to Address Religious Tensions

At its spring 2003 meeting, the International Association for Religious Freedom's Council welcomed a re-constituted chapter in Bangladesh. It presently has nearly 20 members, with its Executive Committee composed of individuals from the Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Bahá'í backgrounds. The President, Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam, is a professor with the Department of World Religions at the University of Dhaka.

Although Bangladesh has suffered religious tensions since the country was partitioned from Pakistan in 1971, these tensions have reportedly increased since the election of a fundamentalist Islamic government in October 2001. The new government is a coalition of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and three other Islamic parties, one of which wants Bangladesh to become an Islamic state. Although the country is 87% Muslim, religious minorities have reportedly experienced increasing persecution under the new regime. Some critics also attribute a rise in Islamic extremism to the 64,000 madrasses, or Muslim schools, which have been established in recent years. In most cases, other forms of education are not available.

While there have been some recent incidents against the Christian community, such as the murder of a Christian evangelist in rural Bangladesh this spring, news reports are generally of the persecution of Hindus, which comprise most of the remaining 13% of the population. Immediately after the elections, there were widespread reports of rape, torture, plundering of property, and extortion targeted towards Hindus. BNP supporters reportedly attacked Hindus because of the largely Hindu support for the rival Awami League party. Although the figure is unclear, thousands of Bangladeshi Hindus have reportedly fled to India to escape increasing repression.

The Bangladeshi government claims that there has not been widespread migration to India and that media reports of alleged oppression are exaggerated. Alternatively, a report from *Amnesty International* states that, "As a minority community in Bangladesh sharing a language and religion with the Indian populations of West Bengal, Hindus have been subjected to discriminatory practices or attacks by Muslim groups in Bangladesh. None of the governments in Bangladesh since independence has taken any decisive steps to protect Hindus in the face of potential threats." (Other Sources: Compass, Hindunet News)

Eritrea: New Pentecostal Churches under Threat

Over 50 members of the Rema Church were arrested in early May for holding 'illegal prayer meetings.' This incident follows a crackdown in late April in which military police invaded work places and private homes to arrest 56 members of independent Pentecostal churches in the northern province of Sahel. The authorities

claimed that these latter individuals had been taken to a Military Training Centre; however, they have not been seen since.

It is also reported that 170 Protestant Christians were jailed and beaten by Eritrean security forces during a harsh crackdown in February and March. Additionally, over 70 Eritrean soldiers have been incarcerated in the Assab military prison for over a year for refusing to deny their Pentecostal faith and return to the Orthodox Church, which is historically dominant in the country. About 50 percent of the population in Eritrea are Sunni Muslim and 40 percent are Orthodox Christian. Because of their conscientious objector status, Jehovah's Witnesses have been subject to particularly harsh treatment, as well as societal prejudice. The latest U.S. State Department report on Eritrea (2001) noted that the "Government continued to harass, detain, and discriminate against members of the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses," but the report raised no alarms about other religious discrimination in the country and, in fact, cited that relationships between religious groups were largely tolerant.

The government denies that religious persecution is taking place in Eritrea. Nonetheless, newly formed Pentecostal groups, as well as 7th Day Adventist and Presbyterian Evangelical churches, are banned. Christian news sources indicate that the government only recognises 4 official religions: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Catholicism, and Evangelical Lutheran. Although the 1997 Eritrean Constitution guarantees religious freedom, its government has imposed increasing restrictions on the newer Protestant churches sprouting up in the country over the past 5 years. There are approximately 20,000 believers in these denominations. (Sources: Compass and Baptist Press)

Germany: Critics Question Association Law

Some religious and human rights groups are concerned about amendments to the German Association Law, which gives the government the power to ban organisations that allegedly advocate violence or terrorism. While purportedly targeting extremist organisations as part of the 'war on terrorism,' critics are concerned that the revisions give the government unfettered discretion to investigate and evaluate religious beliefs and practices of a targeted group. Prior law did not permit the government to ban any religious organisation without first going through the courts.

A letter written by several, primarily U.S.-based, religious groups to German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in mid-June, indicates that "a grave danger of the law is in its providing the government with unfettered discretion to investigate and evaluate religious beliefs and practices of a targeted organisation and to close it down. The organisation may only appeal to the courts after the fact of dissolution." The letter, signed by individuals from the *Institute on Religion and Public Policy*, the *National Association of Evangelicals*, the *International Religious Liberty Association*, and the *Freedom Forum*, among others, went on to say that the elements of the law are vague and general. As such, they could "provide the government with virtually unfettered discretion to initiate banning procedures against targeted minority organisations" even if those organisations "were engaged in solely lawful activity."

The state governments of Bavaria and Hamburg have indicated that this revised law will be used to ban several religious groups, most notably the Church of Scientology, which has long had a difficult relationship with German authorities and was under several years of observation in the late 1990s. It has not been found, however, that such church members have engaged in any illegal activity. A report from the *U.S. State Department's Religious Freedom Report for 2002* says that the German government "does not recognise Scientology as a religion and views it as an economic enterprise." It remains true that the Church of Scientology charges its members significant fees for courses on which it encourages them to embark towards the goal of 'Clearness.' Nonetheless, the report adds that 'Federal and state classification of Scientology as a potential threat to democratic order has led to occasional attempts to exclude individuals practicing Scientology from government employment and some sectors of business.'" Thus, Scientologists face various kinds of discrimination. The report noted that there were 8,000 members of the Church of Scientology in Germany and 18 churches and missions. (Other Sources: Church of Scientology)

Indonesia: Religious Education Bill Sparks Controversy

In early June, as this update was being posted, the Indonesian Parliament passed a controversial National Education bill which requires schools with 10 or more students of any faith to employ religious education teachers of those faiths. This legislation will enable students in either state or private schools to receive religious education in their own faith. The change would allow, for example, the many Muslim children who study in Christian schools to receive instruction in Islam. The bill was apparently pushed by Muslim politicians who were concerned about the teaching of Christianity to Muslim students. Whatever their religion, many parents send their children to Christian schools due to perceived higher educational standards at these institutions.

For the most part, the bill has been supported by the Muslim community and opposed by minority Christian groups and secular Muslim organisations. Some schools based on Catholicism or Islam have oppose the legislation saying that it would obscure their original mission. Other critics say that the state should not be involved at all in religious matters in schools. Supporters, on the other hand, say that the bill better accommodates all religions. The division of opinion on this matter has led to hot debate both inside and outside of parliament. About 3,000 Indonesian teachers flooded the grounds of parliament in late March protesting the bill. This was followed, however, by a rally of some 10,000 in early June supporting the legislation. Some commentators claim that the passage of this bill was political posturing for upcoming elections in 2004. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-populated nation with an estimated 90% of 212 million people following Islam; however, there are tensions between Muslim and Christian communities. Some analysts are concerned that this latest debate over religious education will exacerbate these tensions.

In a separate development, the Indonesian province of Aceh has inaugurated its first Shari'ah (Islamic law) court. Aceh was granted permission to implement partial Shari'ah law 2 years ago, as part of an autonomy deal offered by the central government. Aceh already has about 20 religious courts, but it is alleged that the new provincial-level

court will be able to enforce Islamic law more broadly. While handling property, family, and some cases of criminal law, the overlap with the existing jurisdiction of district courts is still unclear. (Sources: Radio Australia News, Go Asia Pacific, the Straits Times, and BBC)

Iraq: Minorities Concerned for Future of Religious Freedom

While 85% of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims are Sunni's, Iraq has a Shi'ite majority, representing about 55% of the population. Hence, the fall of the Sunni-dominated regime has caused Iraq to move from a Sunni to Shi'ite country nearly overnight. As the regime of Saddam Hussein persecuted Shi'ite Muslims, this group is discovering a new found freedom. However, this change has also meant that some Shi'ite Muslim conservatives are now seeking to impose Islamic, or Shari'ah, law. As such law calls for the banning of alcohol, there have been reports of shops selling alcohol being burnt down in Basra. Also, in early May, two Christian alcohol vendors were killed. Some women have been harassed for not wearing the hijab (head covering) called for by Shari'ah law. Such restrictions are troublesome to many Iraqi women, as the country does not have a history of such religious fundamentalism. Women, for example, enjoyed relative equality with men for several decades prior to the 1970s.

While there have been isolated attacks by Islamists since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, its religious minorities are concerned about their rights in a future Iraq. As the three main ethno-religious groups are Kurds, Sunnis, and Shi'ites, groups such as moderate and secular Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities fear that their religious freedom will not be safeguarded. Christians comprise about 3% of the population in Iraq and include Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syrians, Armenians, Greeks, and Latins. While the 1968 Iraqi Constitution established Islam as the state religion, Christians and other religious minorities were largely granted religious freedom. The future, however, remains uncertain. Some Iraqi Christians fear the increase of tensions with the arrival of aid agencies from the West, some of which combine humanitarian aid with mission work.

A statement released in late April by Christian patriarchs and bishops in Iraq called for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The statement said, "By virtue of our original right of belonging to the most ancient peoples of this land, we claim for ourselves and for all those who live in it today, whether a majority or minority, united by a long history of coexistence, the full right to live in a state of law, in peace, freedom, justice, and equality, according to the Human Rights Charter." Representatives of Iraq's religious communities also released a joint statement in late May rejecting violence and calling for common action to build a just society in Iraq. This group met in Jordan at a conference sponsored by the *World Conference of Religions for Peace*. (Other Sources: Associated Press, Barnabus Fund, Christianity Today, The Daily Telegraph, New York Times, Zenit)

Russia: Test Case for Global Debate over Headscarves

Russia's Supreme Court ruled in mid May that Muslim women would be allowed to wear headscarves in photographs for official documents. While Russia's Muslim community saw this as a victory for religious freedom, the Interior Ministry said it would appeal. Yuri Ivshkin, head of the Interior Ministry's passport and visa department, noted that the "cancellation of the requirement which banned head coverings when taking ID photos will seriously impede the establishment of identification." The Supreme Court overturned an earlier rejection of an appeal from 10 Muslim women from Tatarstan, which is a predominately Muslim region. The women had objected to a police requirement that required them to be bare headed in ID photos. They noted that removing one's scarf in public was considered a sin in Islamic law. There are approximately 20 million Muslims in Russia in a population of some 147 million.

This particular debate has not, however, been restricted to Russia. The issue of wearing headscarves vs. full veils (covering all but a woman's eyes) is also in question. In a related case in the United States, a Florida judge ruled in early June that a Muslim woman must unveil for a license photo if she wanted to drive. The case caused controversy throughout the U.S. and raised difficult questions about the rights of religious freedom vs. the state's interest in promoting public safety. The case was especially sensitive in view of claims that the freedoms of Muslims in America have been restricted since the terrorist attacks in September 2001. Nonetheless, even Muslims are not in agreement about such strict interpretations of wearing the veil. While covering one's head expresses the Muslim value of modesty, the opinion of Islamic scholars on the degree to which women must be veiled varies. Many predominately Muslim countries, for example, require photos of a woman's uncovered face for identity documents. The defendant in this case, however, ascribed to an ultra-orthodox Salafiyya branch of Islam requiring full veiling and, as such, felt that her religious freedom was being compromised.

Finally, in Germany, a Muslim woman (Fereshta Ludin), who was barred from teaching in public schools because she insisted on wearing a headscarf in class, has brought her case to the German High Court. According to the *Associated Press*, "Last year, a federal court upheld previous rulings against Ludin, arguing that while religious freedom are anchored in the German constitution, the relationship between students and teachers from different religions could be disrupted if teachers display their religious identity. At the Supreme Court, Ludin is arguing that the constitution guarantees both freedom of religious expression and unlimited access to public jobs, regardless of religious beliefs." (Sources: Associated Press, Court TV, Orlando Sentinel, and Los Angeles Times.)