

USCIRF: Religious Freedom Deteriorating in Many Nations

Religious freedom has continued to deteriorate in many nations over the past year, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's ([USCIRF](#)) annual report for 2018 released on April 25.

"This ongoing downward trend often intersected with authoritarian practices characterized by hostility toward dissent, pluralism, independent media and active civil society, or took place under the guise of protecting national security or countering terrorism," the report stated. "The most severe abuses included genocide and other mass atrocities, killings, enslavement, rape, imprisonment, forced displacement, forced conversions, intimidation, harassment, property destruction, the marginalization of women and bans on children participating in religious activities or education."

The report used two categories to indicate the degree to which religious freedom is restricted or hindered:

1. Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) or Tier 1 designates nations "whose government engages in or tolerates particularly severe religious freedom violation, meaning those that are systematic, ongoing and egregious."

Sixteen nations received a CPC designation: Burma, Central African Republic, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. This list remains unchanged from the [2017 report](#).

2. Tier 2 describes countries "in which the violations engaged in or tolerated by the government ... are serious and characterized by at least one of the elements of the 'systematic, ongoing and egregious' CPC standard."

Twelve were categorized as Tier 2 countries: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia and Turkey. The list is identical to last year's report.

Summaries of the religious freedom violations for all nations receiving a CPC (Tier 1) or Tier 2 designation are provided in the report.

Previous editions of the report included a "monitoring" designation. This identified "countries previously recommended for CPC designation or on Tier 2 and in which USCIRF continues to monitor ongoing concerns; countries USCIRF visited during the reporting year but did not find to meet the CPC or Tier 2 standards; and countries where USCIRF saw emerging issues or troubling trends that merited comment but did not rise to the CPC or Tier 2 level."

The 2018 report dropped this category, but added "entities of particular concern," or EPC, a designation established by the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act](#) (passed by the U.S. Congress in December 2016) to identify non-state actors who committed "severe violations of religious freedom."

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Taliban in Afghanistan and Al-Shabaab in Somalia were labeled EPCs by USCIRF.

The report made several recommendations to the Trump administration, including appointing a special adviser to the president on international religious freedom, establishing a strategy "to guide the U.S. government's promotion of religious freedom abroad for all," and resettling refugees and correcting "longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum-seekers in Expedited Removal."

USCIRF's recommendations to Congress included a call to use confirmation hearings to assess "competence in international religious freedom," and meeting with religious leaders, advocates for religious freedom and prisoners of conscience during overseas trips to assess religious freedom conditions.

Despite widespread religious freedom restrictions, USCIRF Chairman Daniel

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Mark expressed optimism in a [press release](#) announcing the report's publication, noting that "the importance of this foundational right is appreciated more now than ever, and egregious violations are less likely to go unnoticed."

The full report is available [here](#).