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## Religious freedom. ACN Report: "Grave violations in one in three world countries"

"Two thirds of the world's population (67%) live in countries where grave violations of freedom religious occur in one form or another, with Christians being the most persecuted group. the situation has grown over the centuries, from the roots of intolerance, to produce discrimination and persecution", states the 15<sup>th</sup> Report on Religious Freedom in the World published by Aid to the Church in Need



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[\(ACN\), released on Tuesday in the Foundation's 23 seats worldwide. The Report extends its analysis to include not only violations against Christians, and Catholics in particular, but also cases of "discrimination and persecution" against the members of all religions over the past two years \(August 2018-November 2020\). \*\*Mounting persecution and oppression.\*\* The Report identifies a significant increase in the gravity of violations pertaining to persecution and oppression: "62 countries out of a total of 196 \(31.6%\), where two thirds of the world's population lives, face very severe violations of religious freedom. The number of people living in these countries is close to 5.2 billion, as the worst offenders include some of the most populous nations in the world \(China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria\).](#)



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In 26 of these 62 Countries violation amounts to veritable persecution (Red category), the remaining 36 countries are marked by discrimination (Orange category). 24 countries where “newly emerging factors of concern have been observed” in the period 2018-2020, “such as hate speech, vandalism and religious prejudice”, are listed in the “under observation” classification. The remainder of the countries are not classified, “but that does not necessarily mean all is perfect in matters concerning the fundamental right to freedom of religion.” Violations are carried out by transnational jihadist networks spreading across the Equator that aspire to be transcontinental “caliphates”, Islamist terrorists employing sophisticated digital technologies to recruit, radicalise and attack. Also authoritarian governments and fundamentalist groups have stepped up religious persecution, which groundswell movements of religious nationalism in Hindu-majority and Buddhist-majority countries in Asia testify to. Sexual violence, crimes against girls and women abducted, raped, and obliged to change their faith in forced conversions are used as a weapon against religious minorities. Moreover, repressive surveillance technologies increasingly target faith groups. The discontinuation of religious education classes, especially in the West, fostered radicalisation while undermining interreligious understanding among young people. The same is true for so-called Polite Persecution – a term that reflects the rise of new “rights” or cultural norms which, as Pope Francis states, consign religions to individual’s private sphere. These new cultural norms, enshrined in law, result in an individual’s rights to freedom of conscience and religion coming into a profound conflict with the legal obligation to comply with these laws. **Red Category.** This classification includes 26 countries which are home to 3.9 billion people or just over half (51 percent) of the world’s population. Twelve of these are African countries (Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger, Chad, D.R. Congo, Eritrea, Mozambique, Djibouti, Somalia, Libya) and two countries where investigations of possible genocide are ongoing, namely China and Myanmar (Burma).



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In sub-Saharan Africa, populations have historically been divided between farmers and nomadic herders, with occasional outbreaks of violence originating in ethnic and resource-based conflicts, now exacerbated by climate change, growing poverty and attacks by criminal gangs. These frustrations, explains the Report, have fostered the rise of Islamic militants, both local and foreign, as well as of transnational jihadist groups engaged in targeted and systematic persecution of those who refuse to accept extremist Islamist ideology, whether Muslim or Christian. While religious freedom in Africa suffers from intercommunal and jihadist violence, in Asia the persecution of religious groups stems chiefly from Marxist dictatorships. In **China** and **North Korea**, ACN denounces, religious freedom is non-existent, as are the majority of human rights. Kim Jong-un's regime can be defined as "exterminationist". Of China's population of 1.4 billion, almost 900 million self-identify as adherents of some form of spirituality or religion, and state control is relentless. This is particularly evident through mass internment and coercive "re-education programs" affecting more than a million ethnic Uyghurs (Sunni Muslim), in Xinjiang Province. In the period 2018 -2020, **Myanmar** (Burma) lurched towards the worst crime against humanity, namely genocide. Ongoing assaults against Christians and Hindus in Kachin State have been cast into the shadows by a massive, multi-phased attack by the military and other armed groups against the mostly Muslim Rohingya population in Rakhine State. A grave challenge to religious freedom in Asia comes from increasing groundswell movements of ethno-religious nationalism in **India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand. Orange category.** This classification includes 36 countries, home to 1.24 billion people (16% of the world population), where full religious freedom is not constitutionally guaranteed. These countries include, inter alia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Venezuela, Qatar, Iraq, Syria, Brunei, Kuwait, Vietnam and Azerbaijan. Slight improvements are identified in nine countries, (including Uzbekistan and Cuba) while the situation in 20 countries is worsening. This is due to the introduction of unfair laws concerning the treatment of religious communities.



In Turkey President Erdogan put aside Ataturk's laicism and introduced a neo-Ottoman foreign policy positioning Turkey as a global Sunni power. As exemplified by the conversion of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque, Islam is promoted in every aspect of public life. Internationally, Erdogan has pursued military interventions in Libya, Syria, northern Iraq, and in the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey has also

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sought influence, and impacted religious freedom, in Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo and Cyprus. States in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and the former Soviet countries and neighbouring nations, have passed laws aimed at preventing the expansion of what they consider foreign religions, and also barring “non-traditional Islam”. Freedom of worship is guaranteed but not full religious freedom. **“Under observation”**. The ACN Report places a total of 24 countries under its observation lens, including Gambia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Chile, Haiti, Cambodia, the Philippines, Israel, Lebanon, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. These are countries where hate crimes occur in the form of attacks with a bias against religious people. These range from vandalism of places of worship and religious symbols including mosques, synagogues, statues and cemeteries, to violent crimes against faith leaders and religious believers. **Persecution and COVID-19**. Also the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong impact on religious freedom with “disproportionate application of restrictions to religious activities, denial of humanitarian aid to religious minorities, stigmatisation of religious groups accused of spreading the virus.” States have used the insecurity to increase control over their citizens, and non-state actors have taken advantage of the confusion to recruit, expand and provoke wider humanitarian crises. The illness not only revealed underlying societal weaknesses, but exacerbated existing fragilities resulting from poverty, corruption, and vulnerable state structures. Pre-existing societal prejudices against minority religious communities also led to increased discrimination, for example in Pakistan where Muslim charities denied Christians and members of minority faith groups access to food and medical aid.

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