



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

## 2007 Executive Summary

### International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

#### The Annual Report

The purpose of this report on religious freedom is to document the actions of governments—those that repress religious expression, persecute innocent believers, or tolerate violence against religious minorities, as well as those that respect, protect, and promote religious freedom. We strive to report with fairness and accuracy on abuses against adherents of all religious traditions and beliefs. The governments we report on range from those that provided a high level of protection for religious freedom in the broadest sense (those that "generally respected" religious freedom) to totalitarian regimes that sought to control religious thought and expression and regarded some or all religious groups as threats.

The promotion of religious freedom is a core objective of U.S. foreign policy and is part of the U.S. Department of State's mission. The commitment of the United States to religious freedom and to international human rights standards is also articulated in such documents as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which clearly states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. As an expression of our deep national commitment to these freedoms, the Department of State monitors religious persecution and discrimination worldwide, recommends and implements policies directed toward regions and countries, and develops programs to promote religious freedom. Through transformational diplomacy, the United States seeks to promote freedom of religion and conscience throughout the world as a fundamental human right and as a source of stability for all countries. In so doing, it strives to assist newly formed democracies in implementing freedom of religion and conscience, assist religious and human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in promoting religious freedom, and identify and promote changes in the policies of regimes that severely persecute their citizens or others on the basis of religious belief.

The vast majority of the world's people have religious beliefs, which they hold dear. It is because religion is generally viewed by people as having such a central place in their lives that many regard religious freedom as the most important of rights. At the same time, global trends, regional distinctions, local preferences, and personal histories often lead to significant overlap between religious identity and ethnicity, class, language group, or political affiliation.

The right to religious freedom can be abused in many ways both blatant and subtle. It can be helpful to recognize that abuses of, or restrictions on, religious freedom can take many forms, as suggested by the five categories discussed below. In totalitarian/authoritarian regimes, and states which exhibit marked hostility toward minority religions, a wide range of abuses and repression takes place at the hands of state agents. In other states, where there are appropriate legal provisions for religious freedom, we nevertheless may see state agents neglecting to uphold these legal provisions by investigating and prosecuting instances of societal discrimination. In yet other cases, states may have certain discriminatory legislation that favors majority religions, or may pass legislation or enact policies that discriminate against a small number of religious groups that the state identifies as cults.

The first and most stark category of abuses is seen in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, which seek to control religious thought and expression. Such regimes regard some or all religious groups as enemies of the state because of their religious beliefs or their independence from central authority. Some governments are hostile towards particular groups, often identifying them as "security threats." It is important to distinguish between groups of religious believers who express legitimate political grievances and those that misuse religion to advocate violence against other religious groups or the state. This report categorizes as an abuse a government's broad repression of religious expression among a peacefully practicing population on the grounds of security concerns. For example, the war on terror is used by some governments as an excuse to repress peaceful religious practice. The report also notes those countries and situations in which authorities' over-zealous actions taken against observant believers suspected of extremism have had the principal effect of restricting religious freedom. In some countries, for example, many refrain from attending mosque frequently for fear that their government will characterize them as religious extremists.

A second category of abuses occurs with state hostility toward minority or non-approved religions. These governments implement policies designed to demand that adherents recant their faith, to cause religious group members to flee the country, or to intimidate and harass certain religious groups. This report notes, for example, when state repression of religious groups was linked to ethnic identity, because a government dominated by a majority ethnic group suppressed the faith of a minority group. Also detailed in this report are instances where

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governments used an individual's religious devotion as a proxy for determining his or her political ideology, which resulted in the intimidation and harassment of certain religious groups.

Yet a third kind of abuse stems from a state's failure to address either societal discrimination or societal abuses against religious groups. In these countries, legislation may discourage religious discrimination and persecution, but officials fail to prevent attacks, harassment, or other harmful acts against minority religious groups. Protecting religious freedom is not just a matter of having in place laws and policies which in written form seem to uphold religious freedom. It requires active work by a government at all levels to prevent abuses by governmental or private actors, to bring abusers to justice, and to provide redress to victims, when appropriate. Governments have the responsibility to ensure that their agents do not commit abuses of religious freedom and to protect religious freedom by rule of law in a way that ensures that private actors do not repress the rights of others. In addition, it is critical that governments foster an environment of respect and tolerance for all people. This report documents cases in which governments have failed to prevent violations of religious freedom, or have not responded with consistency and vigor to violations of religious freedom by private actors, nongovernmental entities, or local law enforcement officials.

A fourth category encompasses abuses that occur when governments have enacted discriminatory legislation or implemented policies that favor majority religions and disadvantage minority religions. These circumstances often result from historical dominance by the majority religion and a bias against new or minority religions. Although the majority of the population in a country may worship without harassment, such a situation cannot be characterized as true freedom to choose one's faith and worship freely. Furthermore, government backing of a religion can result in restrictions even on worshippers in the majority faith, when the state favors only one interpretation of that religion.

Finally, the practice of discriminating against certain religions by identifying them as dangerous cults or sects is a common type of restriction on religious freedom, even in countries where religious freedom is otherwise respected. For example, this report discusses denunciations against Shi'ite Muslims in Sunni-majority countries, and vice versa, especially where governments have taken it upon themselves to regulate religious belief and practice according to one of these faith traditions.

The remainder of this Executive Summary consists of two parts. Part I summarizes, on a country-by-country basis, actions the U.S. Government has taken to advance international religious freedom in the nations designated "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPCs) for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Part II provides a summary of conditions in a number of countries where religious freedom is of significant interest, including in Countries of Particular Concern. For each country, this section notes the legal situation and relevant policies, and gives examples of particular government abuses or positive steps governments have taken to promote or protect religious freedom. In most cases, these countries exhibit one or more of the forms of abuses outlined above.

## **PART I: U.S. ACTIONS IN COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN**

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRF Act) requires an annual review of the status of religious freedom worldwide and the designation of countries that have "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom" during the reporting period as "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPCs). Following the designation, a period of negotiation may ensue, in which the United States seeks to work with a designated country to bring about change. Subsequently, depending upon the results of these discussions, one or more actions are chosen by the Secretary of State, as required by the IRF Act. Legislative options for CPC actions range from application of sanctions, to a bilateral agreement, to a waiver. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and his office take actions to promote religious freedom in each CPC throughout the year. This section highlights actions by other U.S. Government officials to promote religious freedom and to encourage the governments to take positive steps to improve conditions for religious believers. In November 2006, the Secretary redesignated Burma, China, North Korea, Iran, Sudan, Eritrea, and Saudi Arabia. The Secretary designated Uzbekistan as a CPC for the first time. Vietnam was not redesignated a CPC. Further details on U.S. actions in nations designated as CPCs and in other countries may be found in each individual country report.

### **Burma**

Every year since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Burma as a CPC. In 2006, the Secretary continued the designation of a sanction, consisting of a prohibition on exports or other transfers of defense articles and defense services pursuant to the Arms Export Control Act, as the action under the IRF Act. The U.S. Government has a wide array of financial and trade sanctions in place against Burma for its violations of human rights. The U.S. Government advocated religious freedom with all strata of society, including government officials, religious leaders, private citizens, scholars, foreign diplomats, and international business and media representatives. Through outreach and travel, when not blocked by regime officials, embassy representatives offered support to and exchanged information with many, otherwise isolated, local nongovernmental organizations and religious leaders.

### **China**

The Secretary of State has designated the People's Republic of China a CPC every year since 1999. In 2006, the Secretary continued the designation of a sanction, consisting of the restriction of exports of crime control and detection instruments and equipment pursuant to the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, as the action under the IRF Act. The U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, and the Consulates General in Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenyang made a concerted effort to encourage greater religious freedom in China, condemning abuses while supporting positive trends. In public and in private, U.S. officials repeatedly urged the Chinese Government

to respect citizens' constitutional and internationally recognized rights to exercise religious freedom and to release all those serving prison sentences for religious activities. President Bush raised religious freedom issues during meetings with President Hu Jintao in St. Petersburg in July 2006 and Hanoi in November 2006. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte raised concerns about religious freedom during multiple meetings with senior Chinese officials. The U.S. Ambassador to China and other senior officials highlighted problems of religious freedom and cases of individual religious prisoners of conscience in public speeches and in private diplomacy with Chinese officials.

### **Eritrea**

The Secretary of State first designated Eritrea as a CPC in 2004. As the action under the IRF Act, the Secretary ordered the denial of commercial export to Eritrea of any defense articles and services controlled under the Arms Export Control Act, excluding certain items such as those used for peacekeeping and antiterrorism efforts. Despite repeated attempts, U.S. Embassy officials were not permitted by the Government to meet with religious leaders. The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers have raised the cases of detention and restrictions on unregistered religious groups with officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Justice, as well as with the leaders of the sole legal political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice.

### **Iran**

Every year since 1999, the U.S. Secretary of State has designated Iran as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, and thus, cannot raise directly the restrictions that the Iranian Government places on religious freedom. The U.S. Government has expressed strongly its objections to the Government's harsh and oppressive treatment of religious minorities through public statements and reports, support for relevant U.N. and NGO efforts, and cooperative diplomatic initiatives involving other states concerned about religious freedom in Iran. The United States calls on other countries with bilateral relations with Iran to use those ties to press Iran on religious freedoms and human rights. On numerous occasions, the U.S. Department of State has addressed publicly the situation faced by the Iranian Jewish community (guaranteed freedom of worship in Iran's constitution) and the Baha'is (viewed as apostates by the regime), and the U.S. Government has encouraged other governments to make similar statements. The U.S. Government has publicly condemned Iran in U.N. resolutions for its abuses of human rights, basic freedoms, and treatment of religious minorities. A 2005 session of the Third Committee of the U.N. General Assembly yielded a successful resolution, cosponsored by the United States, specifically addressing religious freedom issues among other violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms. In 2006, the General Assembly passed another resolution against Iran, condemning its treatment of the Baha'is.

### **North Korea**

The Secretary of State has designated the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a CPC every year since 2001. In 2006, the Secretary continued the designation of a sanction, consisting of restrictions on normal trade relations and other trade benefits pursuant to the Trade Act of 1974 and the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, as the action under the IRF Act. The U.S. Government does not have diplomatic relations with the DPRK, but regularly raises religious freedom concerns in multilateral fora and bilaterally with other governments that have diplomatic relations with the country. In December 2006, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution, which the United States had cosponsored, that condemned the DPRK's poor human rights record. In 2005, 2006, and 2007, the U.S. Government funded an international advocacy campaign focused on North Korean human rights. In addition, the State Department continued to provide funding to the National Endowment for Democracy to support Republic of Korea-based NGOs in their efforts to improve and expand monitoring and reporting of the human rights situation in the country. Radio Free Asia and Voice of America also provide regular Korean-language broadcasting. Since his appointment in 2005, Special Envoy on Human Rights in North Korea, Jay Lefkowitz, has urged other countries, including the Republic of Korea and Japan, as well as the European Union, to join the growing international campaign urging the DPRK to address its human rights conditions and abuses of religious freedom.

### **Saudi Arabia**

The Secretary of State first designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC in 2004. Senior U.S. officials and embassy officers met with numerous senior Saudi government and religious leaders regarding religious freedom issues. Despite the fact that religious freedom remains severely restricted in Saudi Arabia, there were positive developments which could lead to important improvements in the future. Through a series of discussions and through public announcements, the Saudi Government confirmed a number of policies to foster greater religious tolerance, to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology within Saudi Arabia and around the world, to protect the right to private worship and the right to possess and use personal religious materials, to curb harassment by the religious police, to empower its Human Rights Commission, to eliminate discrimination against non-Muslim religious minorities, and to respect the rights of Muslims who do not follow the Government's interpretation of Islam. The Government announced plans and began efforts to implement these and other policies aimed at curbing intolerance. For example, the Saudi Government is overhauling its educational system, including teacher training, curriculum reform, and revising textbooks to remove intolerant references to other religions. It is reforming the procedures under which the religious police operate and retraining the religious police force to ensure that the rights of Muslims and non-Muslims are protected. In view of these developments, the Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the Act."

## Sudan

Every year since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Sudan a CPC. Among the numerous U.S. sanctions against Sudan, in 2006 the Secretary continued the designation of one sanction consisting of the use of the voice and vote of the United States to abstain or oppose loans or other uses of the funds of the international financial institutions to or for Sudan, pursuant to the International Financial Institutions Act, as the action under the IRF Act. The U.S. Government encouraged the Government of National Unity to fulfill the promises of religious freedom made in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Interim National Constitution and made clear that restrictions on religious freedom impede improved relations between the United States and Sudan. The U.S. Embassy has developed working relationships with a number of Muslim and Christian leaders, and U.S. officials met on a regular basis with such leaders in Khartoum, Juba, and other locales.

## Uzbekistan

On November 14, 2006, the Secretary of State designated Uzbekistan as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Uzbekistan's restrictive religion law, which makes it difficult or impossible for many religious groups to obtain legal status, resulted in raids and arrests of religious leaders. There were continuing credible allegations that devout Muslims were arrested on suspicion of membership in extremist groups; some of these were simply conservative Muslims whose beliefs or teachings differed from those of state-sanctioned clerics. Following the CPC designation, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom has held a series of meetings with officials of the Government of Uzbekistan, both in Uzbekistan and in Washington, aimed at forging improvements in religious freedom. Other U.S. officials have also participated in this process to seek important improvements.

## PART II: COUNTRY-SPECIFIC CONDITIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

This section provides a summary of conditions in a number of countries where religious freedom is of significant interest. For each country, this section notes the legal situation and relevant policies and gives examples of particular government abuses or positive steps governments have taken in the reporting period to promote or protect religious freedom.

### Afghanistan

The Afghan constitution states that "followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law." However, it also states that Islam is the "religion of the state" and that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." Decades of war, years of Taliban rule, and weak democratic institutions, including a developing judiciary, have contributed to intolerance manifested in acts of harassment and violence against reform-minded Muslims and religious minorities. Due to societal pressure, some minority religious believers hide their religion and the Afghan Sikh and Hindu populations face a number of problems. Relations among the different sects of Islam in the country continue to be difficult. Historically, the minority Shi'a have faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population. Despite reform efforts, condemnations of conversions from Islam and censorship increased concerns about citizens' ability to freely practice minority religions. Efforts to reform Afghanistan's judiciary with assistance from the United States and the international community resulted in the Government taking limited steps to increase religious freedom. The Government organized seminars for religious leaders to promote tolerance and moderate views on women's issues versus strict interpretations of Shari'a that justified various forms of oppression and violence.

### Burma

The Burmese Government's repressive, authoritarian military regime imposed restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently committed abuses of the right to freedom of religion. Most adherents of registered religions were permitted to worship as they chose, but the Government continued to infiltrate and monitor activities of virtually all organizations, including religious ones. It also systematically restricted efforts by Buddhist clergy to promote human rights and political freedom and discouraged and prohibited minority religious groups from constructing new places of worship. The Government actively promoted Theravada Buddhism, particularly among minority ethnic groups. Although there were no new reports of forced conversions of non-Buddhists, the Government applied pressure on students and poor youth to convert to Buddhism. Adherence to Buddhism remains generally a prerequisite for promotion to senior government and military ranks. Anti-Muslim violence continued, as did the close monitoring of Muslims' activities. Restrictions of Christians and other non-Buddhist minority groups also continued throughout the country.

### China

The Chinese Constitution provides for freedom of religious belief; however, the Government's respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience remained poor. The Constitution limits protection of the exercise of religious belief to activities which it defines as "normal," and states that religious bodies and affairs are not to be "subject to any foreign domination." Chinese law also prohibits public proselytism. There was little evidence that 2005 regulations on religious affairs improved the situation of religious freedom. They, too, define only government-approved practices and faiths as normal or legitimate. In most areas of the country, religious believers could worship without difficulty in officially approved venues. However, in some areas there were significant restrictions. Officials in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region

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tightly controlled religious activity. Three sons of Uighur Muslim activist Rebiya Kadeer received prison sentences and/or fines, and two were reportedly beaten and tortured by authorities. Followers of Tibetan Buddhism, including in Tibet, the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, and Tibetan areas of China, faced restrictions on their religious practice and ability to organize. In September 2006 Chinese border guards fatally shot a 17-year-old Tibetan nun while she attempted to cross into Nepal. Repression of unregistered Protestant church networks and "house" churches continued to be widely reported, with some house church leaders facing detention, formal arrest, and sentences of reeducation or imprisonment. The Government reportedly expelled over one hundred foreign missionaries in the spring of 2007, in what some groups allege was a Government-initiated campaign to expel missionaries and tighten control on Christian house churches prior to the 2008 Olympics. In the spring of 2007, several house churches also reported that the Government interfered with their religious activities and harassed their leaders and members. "Underground" Catholic bishops also faced repression, in large part due to their loyalty to the Vatican, which the government accused of interfering in China's internal affairs. In January 2007 the Vatican approved the ordination of a mainland-selected Catholic priest to become bishop of Guangzhou Diocese, the first such backing given by the Vatican after bilateral ties were strained in spring 2006. In June 2007 Pope Benedict XVI issued an open letter to Chinese Catholics inviting them to resolve differences and calling on China to engage in "respectful and constructive dialogue," after which a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson said that China advocates improvement in Sino-Vatican relations. The government continued its repression of groups that it categorized as "cults" in general, particularly small Christian-based groups and the Falun Gong. Falun Gong practitioners continued to face arrest, detention, and imprisonment, and there have been credible reports of deaths due to torture and abuse.

## Cuba

The Cuban Constitution recognizes the right of citizens to profess and practice any religious belief within the framework of respect for the law; however, in law and in practice the Government continued to place restrictions on freedom of religion. The Ministry of Interior, through its state security apparatus, continued to monitor the country's religious institutions, including through surveillance, infiltration, and harassment of religious professionals and laypersons. The authorities also monitored church-run publications. The Government permitted apolitical religious activity to take place in government-approved sites. Some religious figures who criticized the Government's totalitarian system in sermons were subjected to intense harassment. Since 1992 the Communist Party has admitted as members persons who openly declared their religious faith; however, such persons rarely ascended to senior positions in the Government. Some prisoners reported that prison officials ignored repeated written requests for religious visits. In punishment cells, prisoners were denied access to reading materials, including Bibles. The law allows for the construction of new churches once the required permits are obtained; however, the Government rarely issued construction permits. Government harassment of private houses of worship continued. In 2005 the Government implemented new regulations that restricted the operation of house churches but eased its policy on work permits to foreign clergy.

## Egypt

The status of respect for religious freedom by the Government declined during the period covered by this report. The Constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, although the Government places restrictions on these rights in practice. Religious practices that conflict with the Government's interpretation of Islamic law are prohibited. Members of the non-Muslim religious minorities officially recognized by the Government generally worship without harassment; however, tradition and some aspects of the law discriminate against religious minorities, including Christians and particularly Baha'is. The Constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination based on religion or creed, and in general the Government upholds these constitutional protections. On April 24, 2007, the Court of Administrative Justice ruled that the Interior Ministry was not obligated to recognize reconversion by Christian-born converts to Islam. While this ruling was inconsistent with verdicts issued over the previous three years by another judge in the same court on behalf of 32 such converts, it reinstated a long-standing government policy not to provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status. Despite presidential decrees in 1999 and 2005 to facilitate approvals for church repair and rebuilding, many churches continued to encounter the same difficulties as in previous years in obtaining permits. In May and June 2007, officials of the State Security Intelligence Service (SSIS) arrested five members of "the Quranis," a small group of Muslims who seek to rely largely, if not exclusively, on the Qur'an as the only authoritative source for Islam. They were subsequently charged with "denigrating religions." One detainee reported that he had been beaten and threatened with rape by an investigator of the SSIS. Sources close to Bahaa al-Accad, a convert from Islam to Christianity who was detained for 25 months without charge, reported that his personal security was threatened by officials of the SSIS following his April 28, 2007 release. On February 22, 2007, Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman, whose blog entries had contained strongly-worded critiques of the practice of Islam and Al-Azhar's Sunni Muslim orthodoxy, was sentenced to three years in prison for "denigrating Islam." Agents of the SSIS reportedly detained a Jehovah's Witness and, while making demeaning comments about the Jehovah's Witnesses, struck the detainee repeatedly and threatened him and his family with ongoing harassment unless he agreed to become an informant on the Jehovah's Witness community. The Government again opposed advances in the respect for religious freedom affecting Baha'is. The Government's appeal of an April 2006 decision by the Administrative Court supporting the right of Baha'i citizens to receive ID cards and birth certificates with religion noted on the documents, resulted in a December 16, 2006, decision to overturn this ruling and maintained the government prohibition on Baha'i citizens obtaining identity cards. The Government also continued to deny birth certificates and marriage licenses to members of the Baha'i community.

## Eritrea

Religious freedom deteriorated further during the course of the reporting period. The Eritrean Government severely restricted the freedom of religion for groups that it had not registered and infringed upon the independence of some registered groups. Following a 2002 decree that religious groups must register, the Government closed all religious facilities not belonging to the country's four principal religious communities: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, and Islam. The

Government continued to harass, arrest, and detain members of independent evangelical groups (including Pentecostals), Jehovah's Witnesses, and a reform movement within the Eritrean Orthodox Church, and it sought greater control over the four approved religious groups. The Government also intervened in procedural and administrative decisions of the Eritrean Orthodox Church by supplanting the patriarch in favor of its own candidate. The Government failed to register any of the four religious groups who applied in 2002 for registration, and it restricted religious meetings and arrested individuals during religious ceremonies, gatherings, and prayer meetings. There were also reports of forced recantations. During the reporting period, authorities arrested numerous religious believers not affiliated with the four approved churches. According to some reports, many hundreds of religious detainees continue to be held without due process in harsh conditions that include extreme temperature fluctuations with limited or no access to family.

## India

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the National Government generally respected this right in practice. However, some state and local governments, including those of Chattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, enacted or amended "anti-conversion" laws during the reporting period. The Governor of Rajasthan, later elected to the presidency, refused to sign her state's law, effectively nullifying it. The vast majority of citizens of every religious group lived in peaceful coexistence; however, there were reports of organized societal attacks against minority religious groups. State police and enforcement agencies often did not act swiftly enough to effectively counter societal attacks. Despite government efforts to foster communal harmony, some extremists continued to view ineffective investigation and prosecution of attacks as a signal that they could commit such violence with impunity, although numerous cases were in the courts at the end of the reporting period, including cases in connection with the 2002 Gujarat violence, the 1984 Sikh riots, and attacks against Christians. The U.S. Embassy and its consulates promoted religious freedom in their discussions with the country's senior leadership, as well as with state and local officials, discussed reports of harassment of religious believers with key leaders of all significant religious communities, and supported initiatives to encourage religious and communal harmony.

## Iran

There was continued deterioration of the extremely poor status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. Government actions and rhetoric created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shi'a religious groups, most notably for Baha'is, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, and members of the Jewish community. Government-controlled media, including broadcasting and print, intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly the Baha'is. Reports of imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs continued during the reporting period. Baha'i groups often reported arbitrary arrests, expulsions from universities, and confiscation of property. The Iranian Government regards the Baha'i Faith as a heretical Islamic group with a political orientation that is antagonistic to the country's Islamic revolution and continued to prohibit Baha'is from teaching and practicing their faith. (Baha'is view themselves not as Muslims, but as an independent religion with origins in the Shi'a Islamic tradition.) Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only legally recognized religious minorities; however, even members of these groups have reported imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs. While Jews are recognized as a religious minority, during the reporting period there was a rise in officially sanctioned anti-Semitic propaganda involving official statements, media outlets, publications, and books, creating a threatening atmosphere for the Jewish community. The Government vigilantly enforced its prohibition on proselytizing by some Christian groups by closely monitoring their activities, closing some churches, and arresting Christian converts. Members of evangelical congregations are required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Government restrictions on Sufi Muslim groups and houses of worship also became more pronounced in recent years, and Sufis reported the constant harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services. There are reports that the Government called for a full ban on the practice of Sufism and reports that the Government required some adherents to sign documents renouncing Sufism. Reportedly, the President called for an end to the development of Christianity in the country as well.

## Iraq

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom demonstrated by the Government during the period covered by this report. Government policy and practices generally did not interfere with the free practice of religion; however, the ongoing insurgency significantly harmed the ability of all religious believers to practice their faith. While the presence of varying levels of lawlessness in certain areas permitted criminal gangs, terrorists, and insurgents to victimize citizens, and while this affected persons of all ethnicities and religious groups in such areas, many individuals from various religious groups were targeted because of their religious identity or their secular leanings. Such individuals were victims of harassment, intimidation, kidnapping, and killings. In addition, frequent sectarian violence included attacks on places of worship. This sectarian violence was heightened by the February 22, 2006, attack on the al-Askariya mosque in Samarra, one of the most significant Shi'a mosques in the world, containing the mausoleums of the 10th and 11th imams. Moreover, conservative and extremist Islamic elements continued to exert tremendous pressure on society to conform to their interpretations of Islam's precepts. Although this affected both the Sunni and Shi'a secular Muslim population, non-Muslims were especially vulnerable to pressure and violence, because of their minority status and, often, because of the lack of a protective tribal structure. While conditions deteriorated during the reporting period, this situation was not due to Government abuse. Since 2003 the Government has called for tolerance and acceptance of all religious minorities and has worked to remove long-standing discriminatory practices.

## Israel and Occupied Territories

The Israeli Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty provides for freedom of worship and the Government generally respected this right in

practice. There is no constitution; however, the "status quo" agreement reached at the founding of the state provides that the Government will implement certain policies based on Orthodox Jewish interpretations of religious law. For example, the Government does not recognize Jewish marriages performed in the country unless they are performed by the Orthodox Jewish establishment. The Orthodox Jewish establishment also determines who is buried in Jewish state cemeteries, limiting this right to individuals considered "Jewish" by Orthodox standards. Citing violence and security concerns, the Israeli Government has imposed a broad range of strict closures and curfews throughout the Occupied Territories since October 2000. These restrictions significantly impeded freedom of access to places of worship in the West Bank for Muslims and Christians. The construction of the separation barrier by the Government of Israel, particularly in and around East Jerusalem, severely limited access to mosques, churches, and other holy sites. Such impediments were not exclusive to religious believers or to religious organizations. The Israeli Government attempted to lessen the impact on religious communities, by making special arrangements on religious holidays for both Christians and Muslims, but the main complaint remains inadequate free access arrangements in terms of number of permits issued and lack of smooth access.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) does not have a constitution; however, the Palestinian Basic Law provides for freedom of religion, and the PA generally respected this right in practice. The Basic Law states that Islam is the official religion and the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) shall be the main source of legislation, but it also calls for respect and sanctity for other "heavenly" religions. President Abbas took steps to eliminate religious incitement, although some incidents still occurred, and the PA sought to protect religious freedom. However, Christians were reportedly subjected to abuse or property extortion by PA officials during the period covered by this report, and the PA did not take action to investigate these injustices. For instance, credible reports continued to arise of PA security forces and judicial officials colluding with criminal elements to seize property illegally from Christian landowners in the Bethlehem area. There were several violent clashes during the reporting period between Israeli police and Muslim worshippers on the Haram al-Sharif. Personal status law for Palestinians is based on religious law. For Muslim Palestinians, personal status law is derived from Shari'a, while various ecclesiastical courts rule on personal status issues for Christians. There were reports of instances in which PA television shows invoked messages that activists considered anti-Semitic or that attempted to delegitimize Jewish history in general.

## Laos

During the period covered by this report, the overall status of respect for religious freedom did not significantly change. While respect for non-Protestant groups appeared to improve slightly, respect for Protestant groups appeared to decline in several parts of the country. In most areas, officials generally respected the constitutionally guaranteed rights of members of most faiths to worship, but within strict constraints imposed by the Government. Authorities in some areas continued to display intolerance for minority religious practices, especially by Protestant Christians. Some local officials pressured minority Protestants to renounce their faith on threat of arrest or forceful eviction from their villages in Bolikhamsai, Houaphan, and Luang Namtha Provinces. Arrests and detention of Protestants occurred in Luang Namtha, Oudomsai, Salavan, Savannakhet, and Vientiane Provinces. In some areas, minority Protestants were forbidden from gathering to worship. In areas where Protestants were actively proselytizing, local officials have sometimes subjected them to "reeducation." Two Buddhist monks were arrested in Bolikhamsai Province for being ordained without Government authorization. Conflicts between ethnic groups sometimes exacerbated religious tensions.

## Maldives

The 1997 Constitution designates Islam as the official state religion. The Government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that citizens be Muslims. Freedom of religion is significantly restricted. The law prohibits the practice by citizens of any religion other than Islam. The President is the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam." Government regulations are based on Islamic law (Shari'a). Non-Muslim foreigners are allowed to practice their religion only privately, and visitors must refrain from encouraging local citizens to practice any religion other than Islam.

## North Korea

Although the Constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief," genuine religious freedom does not exist, and there was no change in the extremely poor level of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. The cult of personality of Kim Jong-il and his father remained important ideological underpinnings of the regime, at times resembling tenets of a state religion. The Government severely restricts religious freedom, including organized religious activity, except that which is supervised tightly by officially recognized groups linked to the Government. Some foreigners who have visited the country stated that services at state-authorized churches appeared staged and contained political content supportive of the regime. Defector reports continued to allege that they had witnessed the arrests and execution of members of underground Christian churches by the regime in prior years. In March 2006, the Government reportedly sentenced Son Jong-nam to death for "espionage." However, NGOs claimed that the sentence against Son was based, instead, on his contacts with Christian groups in China and his proselytizing activities in the DPRK. It has not been possible to determine whether or not Son has been executed. There is no reliable information on the number of religious prisoners, but there are unconfirmed reports that large numbers of people are incarcerated for their religious beliefs and activities. Prison conditions are harsh; torture and starvation are common. Refugees and defectors who had been in prison stated that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs generally were treated worse than other inmates.

## Pakistan

Islam is the state religion and the Constitution requires that laws be consistent with Islamic principles. The Government took some steps to improve the treatment of religious minorities during the period covered by this report, but serious problems remained. Discriminatory legislation and the Government's failure to take action against societal forces hostile to those who practice minority faiths fostered religious intolerance, acts of violence, and intimidation against followers of certain religious groups. The Ahmadiyya community continued to face governmental and societal discrimination as well as legal bars to the practice of its faith. Blasphemy laws (and similarly, anti-Ahmadiyya laws) provide the death penalty for defiling Islam or its prophets; life imprisonment for defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Qur'an; and 10 years' imprisonment for insulting the religious feelings of any citizen. These laws are often used to settle personal scores and intimidate reform-minded Muslims, sectarian opponents, and religious minorities. In an important step of progress, the Government enacted the Women's Protection Act, which amended the Hudood Ordinances, moving rape and adultery cases from the Shari'a to secular courts. Madrassah reform is an important government priority. The 2002 Madrassah Registration Ordinance required all madrassahs to register with one of the five independent boards (wafaqs), cease accepting foreign financing, and accept foreign students only with the consent of their governments. The provincial government in Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) continued to pass directives and legislation in accordance with conservative Islamic views, such as anti-obscenity measures under which advertising has been torn down and stores have been fined for selling certain western recordings. If implemented, many of these initiatives would impose Islamic law on all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation. The U.S. Government closely monitored the treatment of religious minorities, worked to eliminate the teaching of religious intolerance, and encouraged amendment of the blasphemy laws.

## Russia

The practice of religion was generally free for a significant majority of the population, and conditions improved for some minority religious groups while remaining largely the same for most of the population. However, some federal and local authorities have taken actions that raise concerns about the Russian Government's consistency and vigilance in protecting religious freedom. In addition some local and regional authorities have relied on provisions of the complex 1997 Law on Religion and a 2006 law governing NGOs to restrict several minority religious groups. A 2004 court decision banning Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow continued to have significant negative ramifications for the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in some regions during the reporting period. A 2007 St. Petersburg Court decision suspended and ordered closed a Scientology Center for noncompliance with inspection and auditing requirements under the new NGO law. Over the past year, three European Court of Human Rights rulings held that the Russian Government violated its international obligations in cases involving the registration of the Salvation Army, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Scientology. There were indications that the security services, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), increasingly treated the leadership of some minority religious groups as security threats. Popular attitudes toward traditionally Muslim ethnic groups are negative in many regions, and there are manifestations of anti-Semitism as well as hostility toward Roman Catholics and other non-Orthodox Christian denominations. Some observant Muslims claimed harassment because of their faith. Instances of religiously motivated violence continued, although it often was difficult to determine whether xenophobic, religious, or ethnic prejudices were the primary motivation behind violent attacks. Some Russian Orthodox Church clergy have stated publicly their opposition to any expansion of the presence of Roman Catholics, Protestants, and other non-Orthodox denominations. Instances of problems in securing entry visas for clergy decreased. The Russian president and Government reacted quickly in condemning a January 2006 attack on a Moscow synagogue.

## Saudi Arabia

While overall Government policies continue to place severe restrictions on religious freedom, there were some improvements in specific areas during the period covered by this report. In addition, there were some positive developments in Government policy that, if fully implemented, could lead to important improvements in the future. Non-Muslims and Muslims who do not adhere to the Government's interpretation of Islam continued to face significant political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination. Charges of harassment, abuse, and even killings at the hands of the mutawwa'in (religious police) continued to surface. Saudi textbooks continued to contain statements of intolerance towards Shi'a, Ismailis, Jews, Christians, and other religious groups, and such statements were also made by public officials, teachers, and government-paid imams. Scores of foreign workers and their family members were arrested for practicing their faith and deported. These kinds of incidents caused many non-Muslims to worship in fear of discovery by the police and mutawwa'in. At the same time, the Government reiterated its policy to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature, combat extremism, and improve the climate of tolerance, both within Islam and toward non-Muslim religious groups. To that end, the Government confirmed that it is reviewing educational materials to remove or revise disparaging references to minority religious traditions; that it is monitoring sermons at government-supported mosques and will dismiss or retrain imams whose preaching promotes religious extremism; and that it is undertaking to screen out prospective teachers who hold extremist religious views and will dismiss teachers who espouse such views. In addition, the Government appointed more Shi'a judges to the Ja'afari courts in the Eastern Province and one Shi'a and one Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a to the board of the Human Rights Commission. The Government also announced several policies and initiated various measures intended to curb religious freedom violations committed by the mutawwa'in. It also allowed unprecedented media coverage and criticism of the mutawwa'in.

## Sri Lanka

The Constitution accords Buddhism the "foremost place," but it is not recognized as the state religion. While the Government publicly endorses the right of members of other faiths to freely practice their religion, in practice there were problems in some areas. Anti-conversion legislation, first introduced in 2004, remained under consideration. Despite generally amicable relations among persons of different faiths, there was ongoing resistance, in some cases violent, by some Buddhists toward Christian church activity, in particular that conducted by evangelical groups. There were sporadic attacks on Christian churches by Buddhist extremists and on Ahmadis by Sunni Muslims. Police have been responsive in arresting and prosecuting persons in connection with these incidents.

## Sudan

The 2005 Interim National Constitution provides for freedom of religion throughout the country, and there was some improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom in the period covered by this report. However, regional distinctions in the Constitution, negotiated as part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), have resulted in disparities in the treatment of religious minorities in the North and the South. The Interim National Constitution preserved Shari'a as a source of legislation in states outside southern Sudan, but recognized "popular consensus" and "the values and the customs of the people of Sudan, including their traditions and religious beliefs," as sources of legislation in the South. The Government of Southern Sudan generally respected the rights of Christians and Muslims in the 10 states of the South, as provided for in its separate interim constitution. However, the Government of National Unity (GNU) continued to place restrictions on Christians in the North. The national Government required that all students in the North study Islam in school, regardless of whether they were Muslim, and even if enrolled in private Christian schools. The President established the Commission for the Rights of Non-Muslims in the National Capital, a CPA mechanism for protecting religious freedom, by appointing the commission's chairperson during the reporting period. In addition there were noted improvements in the number of building permits issued for churches. Dialogue between Christian and Muslim groups continued under the auspices of both the Sudan Inter-Religious Council, a NGO supported by the GNU, and the Sudan Council of Churches, comprised of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant groups.

## Turkmenistan

There was no improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and the Government's treatment of unregistered groups worsened. Following a sharp decrease in harassment of both registered and unregistered groups in late 2006, mistreatment of some registered and many unregistered religious minority group members resumed in February 2007, in a manner similar to that observed in previous reporting periods. During the reporting period there were no indications the Government planned to rescind or modify previous policies regarding religious freedom. All groups must register in order to gain legal status; unregistered religious activity remained illegal and punishable by administrative fines. The Government threatened members of minority religious groups with fines, loss of employment and housing, and imprisonment because of their beliefs. There were also reports of raids on worship services.

## Uzbekistan

The status of religious freedom remained restricted, with a particular worsening for some Pentecostal and other Christian groups during the period of this report. A number of minority religious groups, including congregations of some Christian denominations, continued to operate without registration, because they had not satisfied the strict legal requirements for registration. The Government permits the operation of what it considers mainstream religions, including approved Muslim groups, Jewish groups, the Russian Orthodox Church, and various other Christian denominations, such as Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Baptists. The Government continued its campaign against unauthorized Islamic groups suspected of extremist sentiments or activities, arresting numerous alleged members of these groups and sentencing them to lengthy jail terms. Many of these were suspected members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a banned extremist Islamic political movement, the banned Islamic group Akromiya (Akromiyalar), or unspecified "Wahhab" groups. The Government generally did not interfere with worshipers attending sanctioned mosques and granted approvals for new Islamic print, audio, and video materials. A small number of "underground" mosques operated under the close scrutiny of religious authorities and the security services. There was increased harassment and intimidation during the reporting period of certain Protestant and Jehovah's Witness groups in particular.

## Venezuela

The Venezuelan Constitution provides for freedom of religion, on the condition that its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or the public order; the Government generally respected this right in practice. Religious groups are required to register to obtain legal status as religious organizations. Registration requirements are largely administrative but stipulate that groups serve the community's social interests. There were some efforts by the Government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, social, and political areas. Power was increasingly concentrated in the executive branch and limits placed on free expression. Outspoken religious leaders who criticized this trend were subjected to President Chavez's virulent rhetoric. The President, government officials, and government-affiliated media outlets made numerous anti-Semitic comments which created a spillover effect into mainstream society. There was a rise in anti-Semitic vandalism, caricatures, intimidation, and physical attacks against Jewish institutions. Foreign missionaries require special visas to enter the country, and they noted increased difficulties, especially for access to indigenous areas.

## Vietnam

The status for the respect of religious freedom and practice continued to experience important improvements during the reporting period. Vietnam deepened its implementation of its 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief and supplemental decrees on religious policy issued in 2005. The national Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) organized a number of programs to offer training to religious denominations on registration procedures and local authorities on how to implement the national legal framework on religion. Many new churches were registered throughout the country's 64 provinces and a number of religious denominations were registered at the national level. In January 2007, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited the Vatican and met with Pope Benedict XVI, and in March, an official delegation from the Vatican visited Vietnam as follow-up to the Prime Minister's visit. Vietnamese citizens were generally allowed to practice religion more freely. Despite progress, however, problems remain in the implementation of Vietnam's legal framework on religion. These

include slowness, and in some cases inaction, in the registration of Protestant congregations in the northern region and the Northwest Highlands, bureaucratic delays and impediments, ongoing restrictions on religious recruitment, difficulties in the establishment of Catholic seminaries and Protestant pastor training courses, and unresolved land expropriation claims involving a number of religious denominations. While most provincial authorities have been active in implementing the legal framework on religion, a few have been much less so. Nevertheless, most religious groups reported improved conditions.

Released on September 14, 2007

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