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COERCING FAITH VIOLATES HUMAN DIGNITY

BOTH 250 YEARS AGO AND NOW

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**Police shutting down illegal worship services and jailing clergy.
Government officials ruling on the correctness of theology.
State actors punishing individuals and entire communities
because of their beliefs. Mobs assaulting religious minorities
for perceived religious transgressions.**

These circumstances describe conditions in many countries around the world today. But the use of coercion to limit or enforce certain beliefs is not new. World history is replete with examples from every context and region. When America's founders began building a new nation 250 years ago, such coercion of faith was an animating concern. Their apprehensions were informed by experiences in Europe and colonial America: Many of the first settlers had fled religious persecution to come to these shores. Once established, however, some attempted to govern faith in ways that closely resembled the systems under which they had suffered.¹ For example, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson stressed religious freedom partly because of the imprisonment of unlicensed Baptist preachers in Virginia.²

Photo: Eritreans hold a banner during a protest for religious freedom at African Union (AU) Headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on November 15, 2017. Muslims protested, claiming their religious freedom rights are being violated. (Getty Images / Minasse Wondimu Hailu)

Constitutional protections of religious freedom gradually ended these abuses and ensured that they would not be enshrined in law. The U.S. Constitution forbids religious tests for high office, and the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights protects the free exercise of religion and prohibits the government from establishing an official faith.

The values and standards established during America's early era protected religious freedom for future generations. They also laid the foundation for U.S. promotion of this fundamental right around the world today.

From Founding Principle to Universal Human Right

The First Amendment's protections for religious freedom mark a critical milestone in the history of democracy. As the founders understood, the intrusion of state coercion into matters of religion not only violates individual freedom of conscience, but also damages one of the core pillars of democratic societies: a free and open civic space for all people, religious and non-religious. The framers of the United States' constitutional system knew that civil society was strengthened by a vibrant, voluntary religious life among equal citizens.

As early as 1786, Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom had indicted government efforts to coerce belief.³ Later, George Washington recognized the importance of religious freedom to democracy. He explained in 1790 how an individual's personal faith would have no impact on their rights as a citizen, famously stating that the government of the United States would give "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."⁴ Washington was making a bold declaration that in this new nation, shared civic commitment and individual freedom of conscience would coexist.

These founding statements were a declaration of independence for religious freedom. They put forth revolutionary ideas for America—and for the world.

From the beginning, religious freedom has been intrinsically intertwined with the American experiment. In addition to reflecting a fundamental human right, this freedom enables faith actors to contribute to the public good. Civic space for faith-motivated work has enabled the operation of charities, schools, hospitals, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, orphanages, and more, which have served suffering Americans of all backgrounds. Religious freedom has enabled clergy and religious leaders to participate in the public square and challenge our country to meet its moral obligations to others.

Freedom of religion or belief is also a key thread that runs through the protection of liberal-democratic rights in postwar international institutions. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was adopted by the UN in 1966, recognized the inherent dignity and equal rights of all people as foundational for freedom, justice, and peace. Article 2 obligated signatories to protect everyone's rights regardless of religion, while Article 18 protected freedom of "thought, conscience, and religion"—including individual rights to prayer, changing faith, and collective worship.⁵

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In addition, ICCPR Article 18 explicitly states, “No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.” Considering that the ICCPR only uses the word “coercion” once, in the context of religious persecution, coercion of faith was clearly of exceptional concern to the drafters. Scholars of freedom of religion or belief have written about *forum internum* and *forum externum*. While there are some—extremely limited—circumstances in which authorities can limit public faith gatherings under international law (*externum*), authorities can never infringe upon one’s personal, private beliefs (*internum*).⁶ ICCPR Article 4 specifically protects religious freedom in all circumstances, including even in a “time of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation.”⁷

Authoritarian Power and Religious Coercion Today

Unfortunately, despite international agreements prohibiting coercion in matters of belief, authoritarian regimes persist in such practices because they fear the independence that free belief fosters. Their grip weakens when people answer to a higher power than the dictator. Historically, the moral voice and convictions of religious leaders and communities have played a vital role in mobilizations for democracy and justice, from Poland’s Solidarity movement in the 1980s to the struggle against South African apartheid to Burma’s 2007 Saffron Revolution and Tibetans’ ongoing pursuit of freedom. For authoritarian states and their leaders, apparent strength often masks a deep fear of faith and individual freedom.

The Pew Research Center reports that 58 countries have high or very high levels of government restrictions on religion.⁸ Of the 25 most restrictive,⁹ Freedom House deems 17 to be Not Free (China, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Burma, Vietnam, Algeria, Laos, Belarus, Brunei, Iraq, and Qatar).¹⁰ In these settings, coercion or its threat is a constant; Pew found “*government harassment of religious groups* (either verbal or physical) was one of the most common types of restrictions on religion.”¹¹ Such cases remind us how religious repression often connects to broader patterns of political authoritarianism and suppression of dissent: Once established, repressive machinery does not target either religious or secular activity in isolation, but rather impacts all forms of independent life.

Coercion over faith is not a new phenomenon, but it is often overlooked, despite its ubiquity. Emerging across regimes of different ideological and theological stripes, coercion impacts every aspect of the free exercise of faith. Examples range from state-mandated beliefs to registration schemes that burden minority faiths. Other policies enforce certain forms of dress to govern outward manifestations of faith, while, elsewhere, governments permit forced conversions that attempt to control the inward spaces.

17 of 25
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Using the power of the state to force beliefs on its citizenry is the most obvious form of coercion. For instance, totalitarian North Korea requires worship of the Kim family. The regime allows no competing worldviews, especially religious ones. Those wishing to practice their faith independently from state control face extreme punishments.¹² In a different context, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia requires its citizens to be Muslims¹³ and the legal system is “based largely on sharia as interpreted by the Hanbali school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence.”¹⁴ Those wishing to convert from Islam to a different faith or even switch from the state-endorsed Sunni branch of Islam to a different branch face punishments such as physical abuse and possible execution.¹⁵

More subtle forms of state coercion of religious practice come through required registration. It is true that many rights-respecting nations maintain registration systems with varying levels of requirements. However, these systems become coercive when legitimate, yet unregistered, religious activity is deemed illegal and subject to criminal penalties. In other words, people are being coerced when they must obtain state approval to conduct religious activities protected under international law, or else risk punishment.

Coercive legal systems force communities of believers to apply for state recognition, which is often impossible to obtain due to intentionally unachievable requirements or Orwellian processes designed never to conclude. Such systems place unregistered communities in a “catch-22”: Their legitimate, peaceful activities are illegal due to lack of registration, yet the system refuses to grant them the status to conduct these activities permissibly under the law. And even when communities succeed in gaining registration, complying with the requirements to be recognized as a state-approved faith can present a difficult bargain. Sometimes, they may end up surrendering their spiritual freedom to gain legal status. Oppressive registration systems exist in nations as diverse as Cuba, Eritrea, and Turkmenistan.¹⁶

Beyond actions to “permit” or suppress entire faith groups, governments also try to coerce religious speech. In some cases, the hand of the state reaches into individual worship services: In Nicaragua, agents of the ruling Daniel Ortega regime are known to surveil church services to ensure that homilies avoid politically sensitive topics.¹⁷ In Russia, authorities have brought both ecclesiastical and temporal punishments to bear against clergy who refused to support their country’s brutal war on Ukraine.¹⁸ In these kinds of settings, communities choosing to worship without permission or disregarding state-sanctioned sermon themes risk severe reprisals; leaders face jail, and worship services may be raided by police.¹⁹

Authoritarian governments also employ coercion over individual expression by regulating religious dress. Individual clothing choices may seem an absurdly trivial area of concern. To regimes that fear independent expression and thought, however, they represent compliance or non-compliance with the state-approved worldview (whether religious or secular). In Afghanistan, the theocratic Taliban regime enforces Islamic coverings on women, who face beatings and jail if they resist.²⁰ Iran's draconian dress code enforcement sparked the nationwide "Woman, Life, Freedom" protest movement after the 2022 killing of Mahsa Amini, who was beaten to death while in police custody for improperly wearing the hijab.²¹ At the opposite end of the spectrum, in its efforts to eradicate the culture of the predominantly Muslim Uyghur minority, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has banned wearing the hijab. Uyghur women demonstrating Islamic piety through dress face disappearance and "reeducation" in the CCP's expanding network of prisons.²² In both cases, these restrictions undermine both religious freedom and women's rights, as they are used to restrict freedom of movement and participation in public life for women who do not show adherence to the regime's preferred worldview.

Lastly, the most personal form of religious coercion is forced conversions and marriages, where women, often belonging to a minority faith group, are compelled to marry a man from the religious majority and adopt his religion. In Pakistan, these persistent abuses have victimized women and girls from Hindu and Christian communities.²³ Although these attacks are not carried out by the government, an anemic state response due partly to the hybrid nature of the political system has allowed them to continue.

An Evolving Challenge

Although coercion of faith is an ancient story, its manifestations are evolving in tandem with wider global patterns of authoritarian retrenchment and democratic backsliding.

Closing civic space in democracies can impact the ability of religious groups to operate in society. One area of overlap, present across a number of settings, involves restrictions on foreign funding.²⁴ For instance, India's Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act has impeded minority faith groups and their ministries' ability to receive and utilize foreign contributions for decades. Proposed amendments would deepen government oversight and control, making already burdensome requirements even more so, and empower the government to confiscate assets, including foreign funds, of de-registered organizations.²⁵ Such schemes will further weaken democracy—limiting the ability of communities not only to practice their faith, help the poor, and care for the sick, but also to promote tolerance and engage in public debates.

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In closed autocracies, the latest generation of digital authoritarianism is introducing new mechanisms of religious coercion. Here, China is blazing a trail that other authoritarian governments and their enforcement agencies are following.²⁶ In the physical public square, ubiquitous surveillance technologies from AI-powered cameras to cellphone location data and purchase logs allow tracking of individual clothing choices or activities.²⁷ Online, China's expanding AI-enabled surveillance systems can monitor and analyze religious content and expression shared in cyberspace.²⁸ These powerful tools give PRC authorities the information they need to arrest practicing Uyghur Muslims or members of house churches.²⁹ They expand the ability of authoritarian regimes to further constrict an already narrow civic space, be it religious or secular.

Building Bridges for Religious Freedom

These and other forms of coercion of faith impact millions of people every day, around the world and across the spectrum of belief. In keeping with our own founding values, the United States and its like-minded democratic partners can devise strategies to dissuade authoritarian governments from engaging in these abuses. Collaborations among policymakers, activists, religious communities, and diaspora groups offer opportunities for the democratic community to promote respect for freedom of religion or belief.³⁰

Forming coalitions across differences of faith and politics can be powerful. Freedom of thought, conscience, and belief is a right held by all individuals, regardless of creed or credentials. While advocacy for one's own group is appropriate and right, consistently advocating for all groups helps to reinforce religious freedom as a common good in which everyone has a stake. Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghur Muslims, and Chinese Christians, for instance, have come together to condemn the CCP's sweeping repression of religious life.³¹ Advocating for all will help to ensure broad acceptance of religious freedom and will be more likely to spur positive change.

Persecuted groups need help from the outside. In repressive authoritarian environments, internal avenues to seek redress either do not exist or are extremely circumscribed. In fact, situations of persecution are defined not just by violence, but also by a lack of accountability: Authorities are either complicit, corrupt, or incompetent. Autocratic regimes take poorly to domestic criticism, and they have frequently suppressed the civic institutions that might otherwise stand up for freedom. In these cases, an inside/outside approach can help to move the needle. Such an effort partners advocates and policymakers in democracies with targeted communities in-country, as well as their exiled counterparts, to press for change. Together, partnerships within and without can document abuses and identify abusers. These kinds of collaborations have spurred greater global scrutiny of religious freedom violations in Cuba, Nicaragua, and beyond.³²

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With documentation in hand, highlighting abuses is next. “Naming and shaming” is the oldest tool in the advocacy toolbox because it works. Abusers hate the spotlight. External groups of shared nationality or faith (or both) can rally international support to press for change. At the same time, advocates and diaspora groups must follow the Hippocratic Oath and ensure their outside efforts “do no harm” to those groups living in a closed society.

Lastly, if the glare of international attention is not enough, consequences need to follow. Always the hardest part for advocates, ensuring consequences, or the legitimate threat thereof, can alter authoritarians’ calculations and foster change. And even when consequences fail to modify behavior in a target country, other authoritarians will be watching. In other words, the use of sanctions to encourage reforms in one place can deter authoritarians elsewhere before they act.

America’s founders did much to inoculate our country from coercion to enforce or suppress belief, just as the founders of the international human rights order attempted to do globally after World War II. Yet modern variations of coercion continue around the world. Compared to people living in the 18th or the mid-20th century, we have new tools at our disposal to respond, through collaborations among governments, activists, faith communities, and diaspora groups. By pairing our commitment to the time-honored principle of religious freedom for all with technologies that share information across borders, collaborations that reach across faith lines, and the power of global solidarity, we can help protect the universal right to follow one’s conscience—if we only decide to do so.

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