

Facts About Asia: Religious Freedom in Asia

By the EAA Editorial Office

Editor’s Introduction:

Article 18 of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights is perhaps the strongest international endorsement of Religious Freedom ever written: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” It is particularly imperative in this special section that educators and students have an overview of the status of religion in Asia: the world’s most populous continent.

We begin with recent data from the highly respected annual report *Freedom in the World* by Freedom House that encompasses 210 countries and territories: thirty-eight Asian entries are rated. Based upon the *Freedom in the World* report, it is an understatement to assert Asia’s global position is mixed. Several Asian countries, including Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea receive high global religious freedom rankings while other Asian countries including, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Việt Nam, and notably, the People’s Republic of China, receive low ratings on the *Freedom in the World* report’s religious freedom question. India, although still highly rated by Freedom House, in the past few years is clearly becoming less tolerant of religious liberty. Other sources that follow the *Freedom in the World* report should enhance reader understanding of religious freedom in Asia.

Freedom in the World Report: Asia

Freedom House, an American independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world, evaluates the political and civil liberties of 195 countries and fourteen territories in its annual report titled *Freedom in the World*. As part of its evaluation of civil liberties, the report scores the question “Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?” with four points being the highest score and zero the worst. Using the latest available data from both the 2019 and 2020 *Freedom in the World* reports, the charts below indicate how the countries of East, Southeast, Central, and South Asia, and Pacific Island countries are scored on the question of religious freedom.

Question from <i>Freedom in the World</i>: Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or non belief in public and private?	
Asian Countries and polities with a score of 3–4 (latest available 2019 or 2020 evaluation)	
Score of 4	Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Philippines, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji
Score of 3	Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands

Nine Asian nations and polities score four points because freedom of religion is written into their constitutions, and government and society in these nations strongly support religious freedoms. While any sort of notable discrimination isn’t indicated with Taiwan, Japan, or the Philippines, Freedom House does include a note about South Korea and Hong Kong despite their perfect scores. In South Korea, the military conscription system made no allowances for conscientious objection, and hundreds of men—nearly all of them Jehovah’s Witnesses—were imprisoned each year for refusing military service. In 2018, the South Korean Constitutional Court ruled that the government must provide alternative forms of service and these men were released from prison. Hong Kong ranks in the top category on religious liberty where even adherents of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, which is persecuted in China, are free to practice in public, but have complained of counterdemonstrations and harassment by members of the Hong Kong Youth Care Association (HKYCA), which has ties to the Chinese Communist Party.

Five Asian nations score three points. These countries have freedom of religion in their constitution with strong government and societal support, but certain restrictions or religious conflicts exist. In Singapore, religious actions perceived as threats to racial or religious harmony are not tolerated, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Korean Unification Church founded by Sun Myung Moon in 1954 are banned. All religious groups are required to register

with the government under the 1966 Societies Act. Speech considered insulting to Buddhism is prohibited by law in Thailand and there is long-running civil conflict in the south, which pits ethnic Malay Muslims against ethnic Thai Buddhists and undermine citizens' ability to practice their religions.

In Cambodia, the overwhelming majority are Theravada Buddhists, which is designated as the state religion and promoted in various institutions like public schools. Buddhists practice their faith freely, but societal discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities persists. Cambodian law provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, provided such freedom neither interferes with others' beliefs and religions nor violates public order and security, but does not allow non-Buddhist denominations to proselytize publicly. The constitution of Timor-Leste provides for freedom of conscience, worship, and religious instruction. Religious organizations may register with the government under the regulations provided for nonprofit corporate bodies. Muslim leadership reported discrimination against Muslims joining civil service positions. Despite 2017 legislation approving recognition of religious minority documents, religious minority groups continued to report incidents in which civil servants rejected marriage or birth certificates issued by religious organizations other than the Catholic Church.

These countries compare favorably with the West where the vast majority of countries are rated at four points including the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom, or three points, like France and Eastern European nations such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, where religious freedom is strong but notable rising violence and rhetoric against religious minorities is present. No country in the West is scored at 2 or lower according to the latest available data from the *Freedom in the World* report unlike Asia, where twenty-four countries with significant problems with freedom of religion are located.

Question from <i>Freedom in the World</i>: Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	
Asian Countries and polities with a score of 0–2 (latest available 2019 or 2020 evaluation)	
Score of 2	India, Laos, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Indian Kashmir, Kyrgyzstan, Sri Lanka
Score of 1	Việt Nam, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Pakistan, Pakistani Kashmir, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan
Score of 0	China, North Korea, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Tibet, Maldives

These lower scores indicate countries where government authorities have been known to express anti-religious minority views. A score of one or zero means that the government actively suppresses and controls religious activity with extreme behavior. These nations interfere with religious assemblies and refuse to allow religious minorities to practice openly.

For example, all religious groups in Việt Nam and most individual clergy members must join a communist party-controlled supervisory body and obtain permission for most activities. A 2016 law reinforced these registration requirements, while allowing for extensive state interference in religious groups' internal affairs. The law also gives authorities broad discretion to penalize unsanctioned religious activity. In Myanmar, government discrimination against minority religious groups is frequent, such as refusing permission to hold gatherings and restricting educational activities, proselytizing, and construction and repair of houses of worship. Violations of religious freedom have long targeted Rohingya Muslim minorities and the military continues a campaign to displace Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine State.

Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan rank among the world's worst regarding religious freedom with strong legal restrictions, state monitoring, and rampant harassment against those who do not follow state-approved Islam and religious minorities.

Editor's Note: China North Korea, and India are discussed more in depth in a later section of this column.

Sources: "Freedom in the World 2019" and "Freedom in the World 2020," Freedom House, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>.



i North Korea

If Christians are discovered, not only are they deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot, their families will share their fate as well.

North Korea has ranked first on Open Doors annual report on Christian persecution worldwide since its first publication in 2002. Source: "2019 World Watch List: North Korea" from Open Doors on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/y9zqk9g>.

Open Doors: "Where it's Hardest to Follow Jesus"

Open Doors, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting persecuted Christians in fifty countries, since 2002 has published a watch list "Where it's Hardest to Follow Jesus" that lists the top countries that persecute Christians worldwide. The 2020 list encompasses the time period from November 1, 2018 to October 31, 2019, and is compiled from reports by Open Doors workers in more than sixty countries. A total of 260 million Christians from the fifty-nation list suffer high to severe levels of persecution.

Where It's Hardest to Follow Jesus

- 1. North Korea**
- 2. Afghanistan**
- 3. Somalia**
- 4. Libya**
- 5. Pakistan**
- 6. Eritrea**
- 7. Sudan**
- 8. Yemen**
- 9. Iran**
- 10. India**
- ...
- 23. China**

North Korea has ranked No. 1 since 2002, the first year of the watch list. For 2020, India rose to the top ten while China jumped to 23rd in 2020, an overall increase of twenty spots since ranking 43rd in 2018. On China alone, the report notes:

Two in five Asian Christians now face high levels of persecution, up from one in three the previous reporting period. China's crackdown on both state-sanctioned and underground churches and its growing surveillance network added 16 million to Open Doors' tally of Christians facing persecution.

Since the ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took power in 2014, Christians in India often face high levels of violence from extremists—thousands of attacks take place every year. Several states in India have adopted anti-Christian conversion laws and made it clear that it wants to impose these laws nationwide. Such laws are often used as an excuse to disrupt church services and harass Christians and make it incredibly difficult for Christians to share their faith with others.

On the second-ranked worst country on the list, Afghanistan, the report notes:

Those who are discovered to be Christians may be sent to a mental hospital—because their families believe no sane person would leave Islam. They may also be beaten or even killed by family members, or members of Islamic extremist groups like the Taliban. Violence against Christians remains very high, but the measures taken against converts depends on the family.

In Pakistan, Christians suffer from institutionalized discrimination, and occupations seen as low, dirty and derogatory are reserved for Christians by the authorities. Many Christians are poor and some are victims of bonded labor.

Source: Jayson Casper, "The Top 50 Countries Where It's Hardest to Be a Christian," *Christianity Today*, January 15, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ya-zlygp5>; "2020 World Watch List," *Open Doors*, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ntbq274>.

An Overview of Three Countries of Particular Concern: China, North Korea, and India

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is a US government commission created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The commission's principal responsibility is to review the facts of religious freedom internationally and make recommendations to the US President and State Department. They publicly release an annual report of these findings. Countries with the most extreme anti-religious behavior are given a designation of "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPC) while other anti-religious freedom countries of concern but not to the extent of CPC nations are designated as "US State Department Special Watch List Countries." The chart below is the complete list of CPC nations and those on the watch list with Asian nations and polities bolded.

Countries from USCRIF Annual Report 2020	
Countries of Particular Concern	Burma (Myanmar), China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Iraq, Nicaragua, Turkmenistan, Việt Nam
US State Department Special Watch List Countries	Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Central African Republic, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Sudan, Turkey, Uzbekistan

Source: "Annual Report 2020," *USCIRF.gov*, <https://tinyurl.com/yc4ltqqk>.

China

China has long appeared on the USCIRF's list of countries of particular concern. The Chinese government has established a multifaceted approach to control all aspects of religious activity, including the vetting of religious leaders for political reliability, placing limits on the number of new monastics or priests, and manipulating religious doctrine according to party priorities. A number of religious groups face high or very high levels of religious persecution, namely Protestant Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and Falun Gong practitioners.

Independent experts estimate that between 900,000 and 1.8 million Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims have been detained in more than 1,300 concentration camps in Xinjiang through 2019. Individuals have been sent to the camps for wearing long beards, refusing alcohol, or other behaviors authorities deem to be signs of "religious extremism." Former detainees report that they suffered torture, rape, sterilization, and other abuses. In addition, nearly half a million Muslim children have been separated from their families and placed in boarding schools. During 2019, the camps increasingly transitioned from reeducation to forced labor as detainees were forced to work in cotton and textile factories. Outside the camps, the government continued to deploy officials to live with Muslim families and to report on any signs



A Muslim concentration camp in Xinjiang, China. Source: Screen capture from "Inside China's 'thought transformation camps'" by BBC News on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/y4dgbytf>.

of "extremist" religious behavior. Meanwhile, authorities in Xinjiang and other parts of China have destroyed or damaged thousands of mosques and removed Arabic-language signs from Muslim businesses.

The Chinese government continued to pursue a strategy of forced assimilation and suppression of Tibetan Buddhism, as demonstrated by the laws designed to control the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and those of other Tibetan eminent lamas. Monks and nuns who refused to denounce the Dalai Lama have been expelled from their monasteries, imprisoned, and tortured. During the summer of 2019, authorities demolished thousands of residences at the Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist center in April, authorities closed the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy to new enrollment. Authorities also intensified a crackdown on possessing or displaying photos of the Dalai Lama, continued to monitor religious festivals, and, in some areas, banned students from attending festivals during their school holidays. In protest of repressive government policies, at least 156 Tibetans have self-immolated since February 2009.

Chinese authorities raided or closed down hundreds of Protestant house churches in 2019, including Rock Church in Henan Province and Shouwang Church in Beijing. The government released some of the Early Rain Covenant Church congregants who had been arrested in December 2018, but in December 2019, a court charged Pastor Wang Yi with "subversion of state power" and sentenced him to nine years imprisonment. Local authorities continued to harass and detain bishops, including Guo Xijin and Cui Tai, who refused to join the state-affiliated Catholic association. Several local governments, including Guangzhou city, offered cash bounties for individuals who informed on underground churches. In addition, authorities across the country have removed crosses from churches, banned youth under the age of eighteen from participating in religious services, and replaced images of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary with pictures of President Xi Jinping.

North Korea

The free and open practice of religion does not exist in North Korea due to intense state indoctrination and repression. The North Korean Constitution nominally grants freedom of religious belief, but it also prohibits the use of religion for "drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State." The government treats religion as a threat to the state-propagated ideology known as *Juche*, which preaches "self-reliance and self-development." Christians are especially vulnerable because the government views them as susceptible to foreign influence. Any expression of religion outside the limited number of state-sponsored houses of worship happens in secret. Anyone caught practicing religion or even suspected of harboring religious views in private is subject to severe punishment, including arrest, torture, imprisonment, and execution. The possession and distribution of religious texts remains a criminal offense under North Korean law. Due to fear of arrest or persecution, most North Korean underground Christians do not engage in proselytization.

The *songbun* system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state; religious practitioners belong to the “hostile” class, which limits their access to educational and employment opportunities, as well as other state benefits. In 2019, there were also reports that the Falun Gong movement, which originated in China, was spreading to North Korea, prompting authorities to initiate a crackdown against Falun Gong practitioners.

North Korea has a network of prison camps (*kyohwaso*) and labor training camps (*rodongdanryondae*) to house an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 prisoners of conscience and other enemies of the state. Inmates are forced to provide hard labor and suffer poor living conditions, malnutrition, and other abuses. Some experts estimate that the camps hold tens of thousands of Christians. According to defectors, the majority of Christians detained in prison camps were arrested by the Ministry of State Security because they possessed a Bible—which is treated as proof of a political crime.

India

A relatively new entry to USCIRF’s CPC list, India is formally secular and guarantees religious freedom in its constitution—though 80 percent of the population are Hindu. Many states criminalize “forced” conversion to a religion which is

broadly used as a context to punish practitioners of minority faiths. Hindu nationalist groups and local media outlets regularly promote antiminority views which has increased under Prime Minister Modi. Following the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) re-election in May 2019, the national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims. The national government allowed violence against minorities and their houses of worship to continue with impunity, and also engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence.

The BJP-led government enacted the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)—a fast track to citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan already residing in India—and approved a National Population Register (NPR) as a first step toward a nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC). The border state of Assam, under mandate of the Supreme Court, implemented a statewide NRC to identify illegal migrants within Assam. When the statewide NRC was released in August 2019, 1.9 million residents—both Muslims and Hindus—were excluded. Those excluded live in fear of the consequences: three United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteurs warned that exclusion from the NRC could result in “statelessness, deportation, or prolonged detention.” Indeed, Home Minister Amit Shah referred to migrants as “termites” to be eradicated.

The actions of the government action, including the CAA, continued enforcement of “cow slaughter” and anti-conversion laws created

a culture of impunity for nationwide campaigns of harassment and violence against religious minorities. In February 2020, three days of violence erupted in Delhi with mobs attacking Muslim neighborhoods. There were reports of Delhi police, operating under the Home Ministry’s authority, failing to halt attacks and even directly participating in the violence and at least fifty people were killed.

Sources: United States Commission on International Freedom, “Annual Report 2020,” *USCIF.gov*, <https://tinyurl.com/yc4ltgqk>; “A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World,” *Pew Research Center*, July 15, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y7e3ay7m>; CIA, *The World Factbook*, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yku33xa>; “World: India,” *The New York Times*, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yxfkz5ay>; “China News,” *The Wall Street Journal*, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yya7q78a>.



The Auliya Mosque in Shiv Vihar after firebombing by Hindu mobs over the passage of the Citizenship Act of 2019.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/ydxklqz>.