International Religious Freedom Report for 2015

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Executive Summary

March 19 began as an ordinary day for 27-year old Farkhunda Malikzada. Farkhunda lived in Kabul, Afghanistan, a city that had already endured decades of warfare and still existed under the constant threat of terrorist attacks by the Taliban. Despite this, Farkhunda lived a happy and optimistic life, according to her family. She worked as a teacher's assistant while studying Islamic law. She lived with a loving family and dreamed of being married and having children, and perhaps becoming a judge.

On March 19, Farkhunda's dreams came to a tragic end when she was falsely accused of burning the Quran, an accusation that resulted in her brutal and senseless death. As she made her way home from work that day, Farkhunda stopped at the Shah-e Du Shamshira Shrine in downtown Kabul. She said her prayers and then got into a discussion with the caretaker of the shrine, Zainuddin, about the selling of charms at the shrine, which Farkhunda considered to be un-Islamic. The discussion escalated into an argument, and the caretaker then accused her of being a tool of the Americans, and of having committed blasphemy by burning a Quran.

A crowd quickly gathered to hear the incendiary accusations. Quran burning is a grave religious offense in many Islamic countries, where it is viewed as a form of blasphemy.

Farkhunda denied the accusations and tried to defend herself from the increasingly agitated mob. Before long, a member of the crowd urged the mob to take "justice" into its own hands and kill her. Some of the police nearby tried to intervene as the crowd began to beat Farkhunda and pull at her clothing. The police officers gave up, however, and watched as the crowd tormented and killed its victim. She was beaten with sticks and boards, kicked, run over by a car and dragged, thrown into a dry riverbed, stoned, and finally set on fire as bystanders recorded the crime and police watched every act of barbarity. Farkhunda died in torment and pain sometime during the attack, according to medical examiners, but the crowd continued to abuse her lifeless body.

While Farkhunda's killing illustrates the horrors that can result from false accusations of blasphemy in deeply conservative Islamic societies, what happened subsequently demonstrates that change is possible. President Ghani immediately condemned the attack and ordered an investigation. The domestic outrage after the attack was immediate, led by civil society and women's groups. Afghan women carried Farkhunda's body to her grave-site in a culturally unprecedented funeral procession that doubled as a widely publicized protest against her killing. Government officials and members of parliament participated in the funeral, and the head of the Ministry of Interior's criminal investigation department told the crowd that Farkhunda was innocent. A few Afghan government and religious leaders who had initially endorsed the killing were marginalized and in at least one case fired.

Reflecting public pressure, the investigation was swift, and numerous individuals were brought to trial and convicted for their involvement in Farkhunda's death, including police officers. Appeals in some of these cases continue, and civil society has been vocal in pressing authorities to do more to secure justice. The fact that individuals have been held accountable for this horrific crime represents a significant step forward for Afghanistan's justice system, and sends an important

message to those who might see allegations of blasphemy as a means to act with impunity against others. A prominent public memorial erected on the site of Farkhunda's death has been the site of vigils and a widely publicized commemoration of the one-year anniversary of her killing.

In many other Islamic societies, societal passions associated with blasphemy – deadly enough in and of themselves – are abetted by a legal code that harshly penalizes blasphemy and apostasy. Such laws conflict with and undermine universally recognized human rights. All residents of countries where laws or social norms encourage the death penalty for blasphemy are vulnerable to attacks such as the one on Farkhunda. This is particularly true for those who have less power and are more vulnerable in those societies, like women, religious minorities, and the poor. False accusations, often lodged in pursuit of personal vendettas or for the personal gain of the accuser, are not uncommon. Mob violence as a result of such accusations is disturbingly common. In addition to the danger of mob violence engendered by blasphemy accusations, courts in many countries continued to hand down harsh sentences for blasphemy and apostasy, which were used to severely curtail the religious freedom of their residents.

In **Mauritania**, Mohammad Cheikh Ould Mohammad (better known as "MKheytir") published an online article the government alleged criticized the Prophet Mohammad, and implicitly blamed the country's religious establishment for the plight of the country's forgeron (blacksmith) caste, which historically has suffered discrimination. In December 2014, a court convicted him of apostasy, a charge which was subsequently downgraded in April 2016 after the blogger "repented", and sentenced him to death. He remains in prison pending a decision from the Supreme Court, expected in May 2016, on a possible pardon. Protesters called for the death of a prominent human rights activist who defended MKheytir, Aminetou Mint El Moctar. Authorities issued an arrest warrant for the leader of the protestors threatening el Moctar's life, Yahdih Ould Dahi, but have not arrested him.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which prescribe harsh punishments for crimes such as the desecration of the Quran or insulting the Prophet Mohammad, have often been used as justification for mob justice. Since 1990, more than 62 people have been killed by mob violence (according to Centre for Research and Security Studies in Pakistan). In 2013, there were 39 registered cases of blasphemy against a total of 359 people, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), more than 40 people remain on death row for blasphemy in Pakistan, many of whom are members of religious minorities. Numerous individuals involved in well-publicized blasphemy cases from previous years -- including Sawan Masih, Shafqat Emmanuel, Shagufta Kausar, and Liaquat Ali -- remained in jail awaiting appeal.

In **Sudan** on November 2 and 3, authorities detained 27 Muslims on charges of disturbing public order and apostasy. Those arrested are adherents of a school of Islam that maintains that the Quran is the sole source of religious authority, and that rejects the sanctity of the hadiths -- contrary to the government's official view of Islam. The arrests happened during a seminar in which two individuals of the group were leading a group discussion regarding their views of Islamic teachings. Police charged members of the group under Sudan's newly-broadened apostasy provision. Court proceedings for those arrested have since been suspended, and they have been released, but charges have not been dismissed.

In **Saudi Arabia**, media and local sources reported that the General Court in Abha sentenced Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh to death for apostasy in November, overturning a previous sentence of four years' imprisonment and 800 lashes (the death sentence was subsequently overturned in February 2016 and a sentence of eight years' imprisonment and 800 lashes imposed). Officials from the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice initially arrested Fayadh in August 2013, after reports that he had made disparaging remarks about Islam.

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In a separate incident in January, authorities publicly lashed Raif Badawi 50 times in accordance with a sentence based on his 2013 conviction for violating Islamic values, violating sharia, committing blasphemy, and mocking religious symbols on the Internet.

Other Key Developments in 2015

Non-state actors such as Da'esh and Boko Haram continued to rank amongst the most egregious abusers of religious freedom in the world.

Da'esh continued to pursue a brutal strategy of what Secretary Kerry judged to constitute genocide against Yezidis, Christians, Shia, and other vulnerable groups in the territory it controlled, and was responsible for barbarous acts, including killings, torture, enslavement and trafficking, rape and other sexual abuse against religious and ethnic minorities and Sunnis in areas under its control. In areas not under Da'esh control, the group continued suicide bombings and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attacks against Shia Muslims. In July, for example, the media reported a Da'esh suicide bomber attacked a crowded marketplace in Diyala, Iraq and killed 115 people. The victims were mostly Shia, who had gathered in the market for the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Boko Haram, which pledged allegiance to Da'esh in an audiotaped message in March 2015, continued to launch indiscriminate, violent attacks targeting both Christians and Muslims who spoke out against or opposed their violent ideology. Boko Haram claimed responsibility for scores of attacks on churches and mosques, often killing worshippers during religious services or immediately afterward.

The **Syrian** government and its Shia militia allies killed, arrested, and physically abused Sunnis and members of religious minority groups, intentionally destroying their property, according to numerous reports. As the insurgency increasingly became identified with the Sunni majority, according to experts, the government targeted towns and neighborhoods in various parts of the country for siege, mortar shelling, and aerial bombardment on the basis of the religious affiliation of residents. The government reportedly targeted places of worship, resulting in damage and destruction of numerous churches and mosques. Non-state actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States, such as Da'esh (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), and the Al-Nusra Front, targeted Shia, Alawites, Christians and other religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis. There were reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric.

The result in the Levant, South Asia and northern Nigeria was continued mass migration of vulnerable communities out of areas controlled and threatened by violent extremism with a concordant loss in cultural richness and diversity.

Around the world, governments continued to tighten their regulatory grip on religious groups, and particularly on minority religious groups and religions which are viewed as not traditional to that specific country. Researchers Roger Finke and Dane Mataic of Penn State University found that the number of countries that require some sort of registration has increased significantly over the last two decades, to nearly 90 percent of all countries. Finke and Mataic assess that, while some of these countries regulate religion in what appears to be a non-discriminatory way, many of the measures used to regulate religion, or to decide what is a valid and recognized religion and what is not, are clearly discriminatory. They also found that: the percentage of countries that required submission of religious doctrine for approval prior to registration increased from 13 to 18 percent during their period of research; that the percentage of countries that required a minimum number of religious community members increased from 17 to 32 percent, and that the percentage of

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countries that sometimes denied registration increased from 22 to 27 percent. Finke and Mataic found a strong link between increasing registration requirements and an overall deterioration in the status of religious freedom in many countries. They also found that members of minority religions, or religions that are new to a country, are disproportionately discriminated against by this increasing regulation of the religious space.

For example, in **Angola**, the law requires religious groups to register to receive legal recognition from the state. In order to apply for legal recognition, a religious group must collect 100,000 member signatures from 12 of the 18 provinces and submit them to the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. The Baha'i faith and the Global Messianic Church were the only two non-Christian organizations legally registered; no Islamic groups were recognized. The state, which recognizes 83 religious groups, has not registered a new religious group since 2004, when it established the current registration requirements.

Another example is **Azerbaijan**, where the registration process is also restrictive, and religious groups considered non-traditional to Azerbaijan were often reluctant to attempt to register. Religious groups whose registration applications remained pending included some Islamic groups, Jehovah's Witnesses outside of Baku, and Baptists, among others. Several of these communities were registered prior to a 2009 law requiring all previously-registered religious communities to reregister. These groups reported that the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRA) either rejected or did not adjudicate reregistration applications.

In **Iran**, the government executed at least 20 individuals on charges of moharebeh, translatable as "enmity towards god," among them a number of Sunni Kurds. A number of other prisoners, including several Sunni preachers, remained in custody awaiting a government decision to implement their death sentences. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center database of prisoners, at least 380 religious practitioners remained imprisoned at the end of the year for their membership in, or activities on behalf of, a minority religious group, including approximately 250 Sunnis, 82 Baha'is, 26 Christian converts, 16 non-Sunni Sufis, 10 Yarsanis, three Sunni converts, and two Zoroastrians. According to representatives of the Baha'i community, the government continued to prohibit the Baha'is from officially assembling or maintaining administrative institutions, actively closed such institutions, harassed Baha'is, and disregarded their property rights. Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to reports from exiled Christians.

In **Saudi Arabia**, the Supreme Court upheld death sentences for at least four Shi'a, including Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. The three other Shi'a men -- Ali al-Nimr (Nimr al-Nimr's nephew), Dawood al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zaher -- were convicted of crimes committed when they were legal minors. All three alleged that authorities had used confessions obtained under duress in their convictions. The Saudi government also sought prison terms and death sentences for dozens of individuals involved in 2011-2012 protests demanding greater rights for Shi'a in the Kingdom; some of the charges include violence against security forces.

Since 2013, provincial authorities in Zhejiang, **China** ordered the demolition of several state-sanctioned Protestant and Catholic churches and the removal of over 1,500 crosses as part of a government campaign targeting so-called "illegal" structures. Lawyers and religious leaders protesting the campaign face detention and arrest. In August 2015, Chinese authorities seized human rights lawyer Zhang Kai just prior to a scheduled meeting with the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. Zhang Kai had been providing legal counsel to church communities affected by a government-led campaign to demolish "illegal" churches and crosses. He was finally released in March 2016, but the U.S. government remains concerned about his well-being.

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The exercise of religious freedom continued to be nearly non-existent in **North Korea**. In 2015, the United States co-sponsored annual resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council that condemn the country's "systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations." The resolutions further expressed their grave concern over the DPRK's denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as of the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, and association, and urged the government to take immediate steps to ensure these rights.

The June 2015 report released by the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in **Eritrea** found that authorities prohibited religious gatherings; confiscated religious materials; arrested, ill-treated, tortured, and coerced religious adherents to recant their faith; and disappeared or killed many religious followers over the course of its reporting period between 1991 and 2015.

In 2014, **Brunei** implemented Phase 1 of a Sharia Penal Code (SPC), which expanded existing restrictions on minor religious offenses such as eating during Ramadan, cross-dressing, and close proximity between unmarried people of different genders. Phase 2 and Phase 3 are scheduled for implementation in 2017 and 2018. Phase 2 includes corporal punishments such as amputation for theft, and Phase 3 includes stoning to death for apostasy.

In **Burma**, between May and August, the previous military-led government adopted a package of four laws related explicitly to "protection of race and religion" that, if enforced, will infringe on the exercise of religious freedom and other human rights. These laws, which appear to target members of the country's Muslim minority, were championed by prominent Buddhist leaders. The new government has not taken any steps to reverse these laws.

The **Vietnamese** Committee for Religious Affairs released a draft of the "Law on Religion and Belief" for public comment in April 2015. Despite representations by Vietnamese officials that the new law would begin to bring the country into compliance with its international obligations, the draft law appeared to make only minimal changes to the deeply problematic current regulations on religion. Several representatives of religious communities have asserted that a "bad" draft law would be worse than keeping the current, less formal patchwork of regulations. Others have argued the draft law, while imperfect, will legally "lock in" certain limited rights, such as the right of religious groups to rent property, hold events, or ordain clergy. Subsequent drafts have made some encouraging improvements, but many concerning issues remain unaddressed.

In the **Central African Republic**, a Muslim motorcycle taxi driver in Bangui was beheaded by unknown attackers and his body dumped in front of a mosque. According to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central Africa Republic (MINUSCA), at least 41 civilians died in Bangui during the ensuing interreligious violence, while more than 40,000 people were displaced. In response to the violence, the mostly Christian anti-Balaka forces surrounded the Muslim PK5 community with blockades, trapping the residents inside. The blockades were broken during Pope Francis' visit more than a month later.

Despite a policy of "zero tolerance" for anti-Semitism, the **Hungarian** government and Szekesfehervar city government provided funding for the Balint Homan Foundation to erect a statue to Balint Homan, a notorious World War II-era anti-Semite, which they later withdrew after an international outcry.

The Sunni-led government in **Bahrain** continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics, community members, and opposition politicians for defaming another religion, inciting hatred against another religious group, engaging in political speech in sermons, and allegedly supporting terrorism. In April, the Court of Cassation upheld the dissolution of the Islamic Ulema Council (IUC), the main assembly of Shia clerics in the country, saying the IUC had used religion as a

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cover for political activity.

In **Ukraine**, Russian-occupation authorities in Crimea continue to take action against members of minority religious groups, including Tatars through raids, detentions, and prosecutions through “anti-extremism” laws.

The government of **Russia** continued to grant privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church that it did not accord to others, while limiting the activities of Muslims and other minority religious groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Scientologists. Additionally, Russian authorities used anti-extremism laws throughout Russia to revoke the registrations of minority religious groups and impose restrictions on their religious practices, and their ability to purchase land and build places of worship. Currently, the Prosecutor General’s Office is threatening to liquidate the Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia for alleged “extremist activity,” which would effectively shut down all of its 406 local religious associations and over 2,500 congregations. It could also result in confiscation of their assets.

In **Europe**, some governments expressed concern over entry of migrants and asylum seekers on religious grounds. In Hungary, for example, the prime minister repeatedly emphasized the importance of defending the “Christian values of Europe,” and some Slovak Republic officials portrayed Muslims as potential threats to Slovak security, culture and society and threatened to select only Christian refugees for resettlement.

Positive Developments

Despite ongoing challenges in **Vietnam**, most leaders of religious groups agree that religious freedom is gradually expanding in Vietnam. The government is gradually expanding national-level recognition of religious organizations (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is one recent example), and, in provinces with cooperative local authorities, expanding local church registrations. Unregistered organizations reported fewer problems conducting their operations, particularly in major cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

In late 2015, the **European Commission** appointed two new coordinators – one for combatting anti-Semitism and one for combatting anti-Muslim hatred. Our Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism and Special Representative to Muslim Communities are already working with their respective EU Coordinator counterparts and other European officials to collaborate in fighting trends of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment in the region. In response to the terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen that targeted Jews as well as journalists, members of the Muslim community organized a peace ring around the synagogue in Oslo in February in a show of solidarity with the Jewish community. Such displays of respect and solidarity occurred in other cities as well.

When al-Shabaab militants attacked a bus in **Kenya** in December 2015, reportedly with the intention to kill Christians, a group of Kenyan Muslims shielded the Christian passengers and told the attackers they were prepared to die together. The Muslims refused to be separated from their fellow Christian travelers and told the militants to kill them all or leave them alone.

During the Pope’s visit to the **Central African Republic** in November 2015, there was a peaceful march of Christians and Muslims in the Fatima neighborhood. The Pope was escorted by Muslim youth from the Central Mosque to the stadium in Bangui where he said Mass to 30,000 citizens. Religious leaders said that the Pope’s visit helped restore a significant degree of trust between religious communities. They also said that the Pope’s visit led to the dismantling of some of the physical barricades that had previously divided Muslim and Christian neighborhoods.

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In **Canada**, the Federal Court of Appeal found it unlawful for the federal government to mandate that persons must remove religiously based clothing that covered their faces while reciting their citizenship oath. In November, the newly-elected government decided not to appeal the ruling to the Supreme Court.

In the **United Arab Emirates**, the Roman Catholic Church in Abu Dhabi opened a second church in the large industrial neighborhood of Musaffah, where many migrant laborers live and work, and where several new churches were built in recent years. The government also allotted land to build the first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi.

See also: Briefing on the Release of the 2015 Annual Report on International Religous Freedom (IRF), Special Briefing, David N. Saperstein, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.

Source: U.S. Department of State.

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