



Freedom to Practice

Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)

The following report is based on open source reporting.

May 19, 2014

Introduction

The world is full of different religions, beliefs, and forms of practice, and an optimal situation has personal viewpoints respected regardless of location. But this isn't always the case. For some, religious practice is the reason for traveling, which can put a traveler under a government microscope in countries with strict religious rules. Proselytizing-- converting or attempting to convert someone from one religion, belief, or opinion to another-- is often met with the harshest restrictions.

However, it's not only faith-based travelers who should take heed. Simply observing one's own faith, or opposing on humanitarian grounds what a government views as a religious right, could cause one to find oneself on the wrong side of the law. An understanding of what to expect when visiting foreign territory is therefore crucial. This report will look specifically at the rules on proselytizing and religious practice in general in five different countries, each of which maintain a significant presence of OSAC constituents and are cited as a "countries of particular concern," either by the U.S. Department of State or the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Saudi Arabia

With a constitution that is a combination of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, Saudi Arabia's government enforces a strict interpretation of Islam. While there is no law in Saudi Arabia requiring all citizens to be Muslim, non-Muslim proselytizing is illegal, and can lead to arrest, imprisonment, or even death. Under Saudi law, non-Muslims and Muslims whose beliefs are deemed not to conform to the government's interpretation of Islam can practice their religion in private, but it must stay there. Yet they are still vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and detention. In February 2013, 53 Ethiopian workers were arrested for conducting a Christian ceremony in a private home. During Advent in 2011, 36 Ethiopians were arrested under similar circumstances. Moreover, religious extremists are sometimes said to harass and assault local citizens and foreigners alike. In spite of all this, the government continues to maintain its stance on religious freedom, limited as it might be.

China

The Chinese government is officially atheist, although it recognizes five main religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Foreign residents who belong to religious groups outside of these are generally permitted to practice their faith. However, proselytizing, or any form of public worship for that matter, is illegal. Religious books are not necessarily banned in China, but the government can confiscate or punish individuals for the distribution of unapproved Bibles, Muslim books, Falun Gong materials, and interpretations of religious texts.

In cases where the country is hosting a major event, approaching a significant anniversary, or dealing with social turmoil, the rules can change. For example, in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympic Summer Games in Beijing, several foreigners were detained and interrogated, and in some cases had their visas revoked for "illegal religious activity." Following the spring 2008 protests that swept through Tibet and surrounding provinces, many Tibetan Buddhists reported severe restrictions on their freedom to practice. While experiencing more official tolerance than in Saudi Arabia, practitioners of faith in China should not always assume that yesterday's freedoms will be recognized tomorrow.

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Egypt

Egypt is a predominately Muslim country, although its constitution allows members of what it refers to as the “divine” religions-- namely Judaism, Islam, and Christianity-- to practice religious rituals and establish places of worship. (Conversely, Jehovah’s Witnesses are one of the more tightly restricted religions in the country.) Non-Muslim religions are engaged in many layers of society, and have been for many years. Neither the constitution nor the civil and penal codes prohibit proselytizing, and the government generally tolerates foreign religious workers on condition that they do not proselytize to Muslims. Foreign religious workers generally refrain from proselytizing to avoid any legal trouble or extra-legal repercussions. There is also little to indicate that foreign practitioners of faith are either targeted by the government or extremists.

However, the political turmoil in the country, and the sectarian strife that has come with it, leave the country in a precarious state. Over the last few years, Coptic Orthodox Christians have been the victims of brazen attacks by vigilante groups, with perpetrators seldom being brought to justice. It’s not clear that these types of actions will one day target foreigners, but Egypt’s current political and religious landscape is anything but certain.

Pakistan

Pakistan’s constitution establishes Islam as the state religion. While the freedom to express an alternative viewpoint is codified, like Saudi Arabia, there are strict limitations. However, too often the government has offered little protection or cover to members of minority religions, which has led to vigilantes and other extremists enforcing their own religious laws with impunity. Christians, Shia Muslims (the majority of the country are Sunni), Sufis, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists all complain of being targets of harassment and sometimes violence, and there is a pervading sense among these communities that the government isn’t doing enough to protect them.

Another complicated issue deals with “blasphemy.” Pakistan’s blasphemy laws forbid damaging or defiling a place of worship or a sacred object, outraging religious feelings, defiling the Qur’an, and defaming Muhammad. However, analysts say that blasphemy allegations are increasingly used to settle feuds or take property. According to a 2012 study by the Center for Research and Security Studies, blasphemy accusations have surged in Pakistan, with 80 complaints in 2011, up from a single case in 2001. There is no penalty for false accusations.

Like Egypt, violence tends to be perpetrated against locals, and foreigners are not regular targets (although a Swedish missionary was shot but not killed in late 2012). However, extremist violence is not always predictable, and depending on the catalyst, any range of groups can one day become the victims.

Burma

Burma does not maintain a state religion per se, but 90% of the country identifies as Buddhist, and adherents are thought to be given preferential treatment both from and within the government. Proselytizing by non-Buddhist clergy is forbidden, and the government prohibits the import of Bibles and Qur’ans in indigenous languages. Minority religions, on the other hand, are often mistreated. Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, for example, are denied citizenship and are often targets of vigilante violence that the government makes little effort to stop. Over the past two years, such violence has resulted in over a thousand deaths, the destruction of over ten thousand homes, mosques, and schools, and the displacement of nearly 250,000 people.

As [OSAC reported in the past](#), Western NGOs in Rakhine have been caught in the cross-fire. An employee of one sparked outrage after removing a Buddhist flag from the organization’s premise. Intended to show the NGO’s neutrality, the act instead was taken by some as a slight against Buddhism.

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As a result, violent mobs attacked some 20 offices, guesthouses, and warehouses belonging to international NGOs. Religious freedom, it would seem, has not kept pace with the country's push for political reform.

Around the Globe

To be sure, these aren't the only areas of the world where foreigners can get into trouble over religion:

- In Libya, four foreigners were arrested in Benghazi in February 2013 on suspicion of being Christian missionaries and printing books about Christianity; the four included an Egyptian, a South African, a Korean, and a Swede traveling on a U.S. passport;
- In Israel, officially a Jewish state, the government respects the freedom of worship, but non-Jewish proselytizing is unofficially off-limits;
- North Korea has made headlines with its arrests of Christian missionaries in recent years; and
- In Northern Ireland, sectarian tensions between Roman Catholics and Protestants boil over every year during "marching season," and although violence between the groups is not as predictable and commonplace as it once was, outsiders identifying with either group risk being targeted unknowingly should they be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Additionally, individuals associated with organizations with no religious connection at all may still find themselves at odds with local religious laws. For example, activists may cite human-rights concerns when working to end practices such as stoning adulterers or homosexuals, circumcision, or underage marriage; however, those practices may be viewed as having religious components, and activism against them as proselytization. As a rule, OSAC constituents should be keenly aware of religious and cultural norms and sensitivities when operating abroad; this is not just good business sense, it's good security sense as well.

Conclusion

OSAC constituents of any sector should have a clear understanding of the local landscape before they travel abroad, and a country's stance on religion is a big part of that. Often more than just cultural taboo, proselytizing or practicing religion can lead to fines, harassment, deportation, or incarceration. This knowledge should be used by all individuals or groups before they plan their operations. For more in-depth information on a particular country's stance on religious freedom, please see the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's [2014 Annual Report](#) as well the U.S. Department of State's [Countries of Particular Concern](#).

For Further Information

Please direct any questions regarding this report to OSAC's [Cross Regional Analyst](#).

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