

# Religious Freedom – The 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s Paradigm

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In 1982, I arrived in China to teach, by ship incidentally. No one knew whether religion had survived China’s Cultural Revolution that sought to stamp out all religious symbols and practices. To my surprise and the surprise of most scholars, I found that religion not only had survived, but grown behind – what was then called – the Bamboo Curtain.

In November 1989, I flew into West Berlin, Germany, to catch a flight from East Berlin to Soviet Central Asia. As I got off the plane, my friend rushed to meet me at the airport, asking, “Did you hear?” “Hear what?” We drove straight to the Berlin Wall as it was falling. As the Iron Curtain fell, the Communist attempt to rid the world of religion also came to an end.

On September 11, 2001, I was teaching in the Middle East in a town with 20,000 Afghani Taliban. The events of that day and what followed are what motivated me to do the research on religious freedom that I will describe to you today. This research has completely changed the way people now talk about religious freedom. It has shifted from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century paradigm that focused primarily on the types of government restrictions seen in China and the Soviet Union to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century paradigm that recognizes that the actions of groups in society can affect religious freedom as much and perhaps even more than the actions of governments.

My research has not only helped shift the focus to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century paradigm, it also uses 21<sup>st</sup> century social scientific methods to study and track. Join me now as I take you through the findings of this new research, which is being discussed and

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acted upon by policy makers throughout the world, including the United Nations, the European Parliament, the White House, and even at the Vatican, where we are today.

We live in a world where more than eight-in-ten people follow a religion. And among the 16% who don't, many of them have some religious beliefs or engage in some religious practices. Because most people have some attachment to religion, it's important to look at HOW FREE people are to make personal decisions about their religion, changing their religion, or having no religion at all.

But religious freedom is very difficult to measure because how can you measure how freed someone is? So – as a social scientist – I measure the inverse. I measure RESTRICTIONS on religious freedom that come from governments AND from groups in society.

The findings of my study at the Pew Research Center show that 40% of the world's countries have high or very high restrictions on religion, but because several of these countries are very populous, about three-quarters [74%] of the world's population – totaling 5.1 billion people – live with high restrictions.

These findings are based on a comprehensive analysis of 198 countries and territories. Each year since 2006, my team at the Pew Research Center has carefully studied the laws and constitutions for EACH of these countries as well as human rights reports from major international sources – such as the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, the European Union and the U.S. State Department. Based on these sources, we count up and categorize each reported government restriction on religion and each reported social hostility involving religion, and use these data to create indexes, which I'll explain in a moment.

There's one important thing to keep in mind – this Pew Research study does not place a value judgment on any particular restriction. In France, for instance, the government's ban of the burqa – the Muslim full body covering – has considerable political and public support. In our study, this ban still counts as a restriction regardless of its popularity. In that way, Pew

Research is like a thermometer. Our job is to measure, not to diagnose or suggest a treatment.

With that in mind, what do I mean by “government restrictions on religion” and “social hostilities involving religion”? Let me give two examples.

In Pakistan, blasphemy is LEGALLY punishable by imprisonment or death – in other words, the government can put you to death for remarks or actions considered to be critical of God. THAT’S a GOVERNMENT restriction. But when assassins killed two prominent Pakistani politicians when they spoke out against the blasphemy law, THAT’S a SOCIAL HOSTILITY involving religion.

Another example: in Indonesia, the GOVERNMENT has declared that Ahmadiyyas have strayed from true Islam, and therefore prohibits them from sharing their faith with anyone outside their mosques. THAT’S a GOVERNMENT restriction. But when Indonesian mobs kill Amadiyyas and burn down their mosques, THAT’S a SOCIAL HOSTILITY involving religion.

My study measures 20 different types of government restrictions on religion, and adds them up into a Government Restrictions Index. The more restrictions and the greater their severity, the higher the score. Based on this index, the study finds that almost two-thirds of the people live in countries with high or very high government restrictions. Besides those just mentioned, these include:

restrictions on THE WEARING OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS, which is limited in more than a quarter of all countries. For instance, the European Court of Human Rights recently found that British law does not adequately protect an employee’s right to display religious symbols in the workplace – such as wearing a cross.

restrictions also include IMPRISONMENTS, which occur in nearly a third of all countries. In Burma, for instance, Buddhist monks continue to languish in prison cells for their role as clergy in promoting human rights and democracy.

and government restrictions on CONVERTING from one reli-

gion to another occur in about a quarter of the countries. For example, five of India's 28 states have anti-conversions laws. In practice, these laws are used to prevent Hindus from converting to Islam or Christianity. And when conversions occur, they are sometimes met with hostilities. I'll talk more about the association of religious restrictions and hostilities in a bit.

My study measures 13 different types of social hostilities involving religion, and adds them up into a Social Hostilities Index. The more hostilities and the greater their severity, the higher the score. Based on this index, the study finds that half the world's people live in countries with high or very high social hostilities related to religion. Besides those just mentioned, these include:

SECTARIAN VIOLENCE, which occurs in 17%, or more than one-out-of-every-seven countries worldwide. In Iraq, for instance, even though the civil war ended years ago, acts of sectarian violence continue to occur on an almost daily basis.

religion-related TERRORISTS, who are active in more than a third of the countries worldwide, including recently in France, where a Rabbi and several Jewish school children were gunned down in a brazen act of terror.

the use of VIOLENCE TO ENFORCE RELIGIOUS norms occurs in one third of the countries worldwide. For instance, in Indonesia – where religious belief is required by law – Alexander An was attacked by angry mobs after he declared his non-belief on an Atheist website. And, when police showed up to intervene, rather than arresting the mob, Alexander was arrested on charges of blasphemy. Again, another example of the association between government restrictions and social hostilities.

One important contribution of this study is that it tracks changes over time. As I mentioned at the start, 40% of the countries have high or very high restrictions on religion. But the situation just five years earlier was markedly different – then, just 29% of the countries had high or very high restrictions.

So, let's look NOW at how all 198 countries and territories score on the indexes.

Each dot represents a country. A country's government restrictions index score is on the horizontal, or x-axis, and its social hostilities index score is on the vertical, or y-axis. The further a country's dot is to the right – the higher the government restrictions. The closer a country's dot is to the top – the higher the social hostilities.

There are two things to notice. First, there are very few countries in the top left sections of the graph. This means that when government restrictions are low, social hostilities tend to be low, and vice versa.

And second, notice that in 2007 many countries were clustered in the lower left corner – low on both indexes. But as you can see as we go through time from 2007 to 2011, the general trend is moving toward higher restrictions. This is what we have called a “rising tide of restrictions on religion.”

Now, let's pull out and look at just the 25 most populous countries. Among the largest countries, those with the lowest scores on both indexes are in the lower left. These include Brazil, the Philippines, Japan, and the United States. The four countries in the top right corner – Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Russia – stand out as having the most restrictions on religion BECAUSE they are very high on both indexes.

In Egypt, for instance, religious conversion is a one-way street. The government PERMITS people to convert into Islam, but it PROHIBITS people from converting away from Islam. And – when people do choose to convert – it is often a trigger for social violence.

In RUSSIA, the Mayor of Moscow has limited the number of mosques to four despite a growing Muslim population, which numbers more than 1 million due to migration. This means – per mosque – hundreds of thousands of people squeezing into spaces meant only for HUNDREDS.

And CHINA – down in the lower right – is what social scientists call an outlier. It's in the moderate range for social

hostilities, while government restrictions are much higher. These high restrictions might be keeping social hostilities in check. The data, however, show an increase in social hostilities in China over the past five years. For example, increasing numbers of Buddhists have “self-immolated” themselves – setting themselves on fire – to protest Chinese government policies toward Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism.

In our studies, we divide the world into five major regions so we can look at broad geographic patterns. Looking at the regions, religious restrictions and social hostilities increased in each of them over the five years of the study – in the Americas, sun-Saharan Africa, Europe and Asia-Pacific. But restrictions rose most substantially in the Middle East and North Africa – including through 2011, when the political uprisings known as the Arab Spring occurred.

What contributes to these high and rising religious restrictions and hostilities in the Middle East and North Africa? To answer this, let’s look at some data.

The study finds that, on average, each type of government restriction is associated with MORE social hostility, NOT less. And among the 20 types of government restrictions analyzed, HIGH government FAVORITISM of one religion at the expense of others has the STRONGEST association with social hostilities involving religion.

How does the Middle East and North Africa compare with the rest of the world on this measure? About eight times the share of countries in the region have high or very high government favoritism of religion compared with the rest of the world.

So, it’s not surprising that social hostilities are high.

Likewise, social hostilities involving religion are associated with HIGHER government restrictions, NOT lower. The study finds that among the 13 types of social hostilities studied, sectarian or communal violence between religious groups has the STRONGEST association with government restrictions on religion.

Again, how does the Middle East and North Africa stack up against the rest of the world on this measure? Sectarian

violence is four times more prevalent among the countries in the region than elsewhere in the world.

So, it's not surprising that government restrictions are high.

Government restrictions on religion can also have impacts or influences across national borders. For example, in 2012, Hamza Kashgari, a 23-year-old newspaper columnist in Saudi Arabia, tweeted doubts about Muhammad on the prophet's birthday. He was accused of blasphemy and received death threats. He then fled Saudi Arabia hoping to reach Australia, but he was detained in Malaysia. Malaysian police honored an extradition request by Saudi authorities and he was flown back to Saudi jail cell. So, a religious restriction in Saudi Arabia was able to reach THOUSANDS of miles beyond its borders and be enforced by another government.

Yet, the news is not all negative BECAUSE this NEW way of looking at religious freedom is stimulating discussion and action among groups such as the United Nations, the European Parliament, and the U.S. Congress.

In 2011 alone, the sources used in our study reported that 76% of countries had government or societal initiatives to reduce religious restrictions or hostilities. For example, Austria hosted this year's United Nations Alliance of Civilizations annual meeting and focused on the RISING TIDE OF RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGION, engaging world and religious leaders on the topic, including Cardinal John and Imam Jega of NIGERIA – a country beset by many of the social hostilities I've described today.

Twenty two years ago, Boris Yeltzen and the leaders of the other republics of the Soviet Union converged suddenly and secretly in the Alma-Ata, then the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, where I was coordinating cultural and educational exchanges for the Kazakh leader, Nazarbaev. They met to at once dissolve the Soviet Union. This happened in the building where I had my office!

Within a short time, now President Nazarbaev held a press conference in Alma-Ata with then U.S. Secretary of State James Baker. During the press conference, Nazarbaev was asked

whether the new country of Kazakhstan would have religious freedom. He looked around the room and answered, “Yes, of course! For the Muslims, the Christian Orthodox, and – pointing at me – for the foreigners.”

Hardly could I have imagined that 22 years later I’d be doing research that would allow President Nazarbaev – still the current president of Kazakhstan – to assess how well that intention he expressed has materialized in practice.

For those interested in seeing how Kazakhstan and 197 other countries and territories score on the government restrictions and social hostilities indexes, check out our reports at [www.PewForum.org](http://www.PewForum.org). Thank you!

Also, follow my blog at [www.theWeeklyNumber.com](http://www.theWeeklyNumber.com).

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