

PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES AND DURING ARMED CONFLICTS

Religious discrimination has been a problem, well forever. And even though a lot has been achieved in terms of eliminating this unpleasant phenomenon, even in 2015, religious discrimination is all around us in many forms. The most endangered religious groups are minorities in a country that follows an entirely different religion. And if the political system in this country is an authoritarian and intolerant one, the minority tends to be in trouble.

Some of the typical examples of minorities that are discriminated or even threatened are the well-known Kurds in Syria and Iraq, the Tibetans in China or the high number of tribes and communities throughout Africa. The real problem when considering what religious minority is actually being threatened is to classify what a religious minority is. And most importantly, find out if their religion is the reason for their discrimination. Because that usually isn't the case. There are usually multiple reasons for a certain group to be discriminated, and a large amount of them, religion is only part of the whole picture.

Religion has always been a reason for conflict. This means, that there are groups that practice different religions and which have a conflict between them. But most of the time, these groups are not minorities. For example, the medieval crusades are in no way a minority conflict. They are about as close to being a minority conflict as Lil Wayne is to learning to play the guitar. It is important to understand that religion usually not the only reason for discrimination and other factors such as ethnicity, language or culture are very much involved.

For example, Boko Haram has been in the spotlight of media attention lately. Boko Haram is a group of rebels operating in Nigeria. Their goal is to make Nigeria a strictly Muslim country, which will obey the laws of Sharia. This organization, now officially considered a terrorist organization by the UN, has led multiple killings and kidnappings. The victims are in most cases Christians, although it is not a rule. In 2011 the UN headquarters in Abuja was attacked and 16 people died in an explosion. The local government claims Boko Haram was responsible for this as well as for 150 other deaths throughout the country that year.

Another disgusting method used by the Boko Haram is kidnapping children and selling them for profit. In 2014, 276 female Christian students were kidnapped from government schools and later used either as sexual slaves or sold for ridiculous prices among the men of Boko Haram.

How come that such an organization still operates? Although the Security Council has already discussed the matter, no actual action has been taken. The Security Council demanded that Boko Haram immediately halt all hostilities, disarm and demobilize as well as demanding the release of all captives held by the group, including the 276 schoolgirls seized in April. However there has been no reaction from the side of Boko Haram

Fun Fact: The online activist organization Avaaz applauded the Security Council for its statement. The organization has launched a campaign calling on the council to take action regarding Boko Haram. It said the campaign was supported by more than 725,000 people around the world and shared by 50,000 people on Facebook.

Kurds are probably the best-known example of a discriminated religious minority. Kurds are a people originated in the Middle-East, which are genetically close to the Persians and other Iranian tribes. Nowadays, most Kurds have found a home in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. However they have been oppressed by all the countries they now live in, mainly Turkey and Syria.

In Syria, Kurds have mainly been active in the Syrian Civil war. The Kurdish forces battle against the local Islamist rebels and the original government forces as well. Lately the Kurds have been under heavy attack from the infamous group known as ISIS. This group is currently capturing Kurd villages and killing Kurd people.

Once again, the UN has been fairly inactive in this matter. Although multiple resolutions have been adopted, most of them only condemn the actions of ISIS. Some military action has been taken, but it is nowhere near to what is needed.

UN Involvement (definitions)

1) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

The *Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief* is an independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. The mandate holder has been invited to identify existing and emerging obstacles to the freedom of religion or belief, as well as to present recommendations on ways and means to overcome such obstacles

2) The Human Rights Committee

The Human Rights Committee is a body of independent experts that monitors implementations of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by its State parties. All States parties are obliged to submit regular reports to the Committee on how the rights are being implemented. States must initially report one year after acceding to the Covenant and then whenever the Committee requests (usually every four years). The Committee examines each report and addresses its concerns and recommendations to the State party in the form of "concluding observations".

3) The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) is a body of independent experts which monitors implementations of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by its States parties. The Committee was established under ECOSOC Resolution 1985/17 of 28 May 1985 to carry out the monitoring functions assigned to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in Part IV of the Covenant. All States parties are obliged to submit regular reports to the Committee on how the rights are being implemented. States must initially report within two years of accepting the Covenant and every five years thereafter. The Committee examines each report and addresses its concerns and recommendations to the State party in the form of “concluding observations”.

FURTHER READING:

http://www.un.org/en/events/humanrightsday/2009/discrimination_religious.shtml

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurds#Kurdish_communities

<https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/ir0108a.pdf>

<http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11520.doc.htm>

<http://www.france24.com/en/20150120-un-security-council-military-action-boko-haram-nigeria/>