Research Report

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Forum: *Human Rights Council*
Issue: *Political and religious freedom in East Asia*

Position: *Deputy Chair*

Introduction

Political freedom is one of the most important features of democratic societies. It is described as free of any kind of oppression or compulsion, absence of disabling conditions for a person and the fulfillment of enabling conditions the absence of life conditions of compulsion. Although political freedom is often interpreted negatively as the freedom from unreasonable external constraints on action, it can also refer to the positive exercise of rights and possibilities for action. The concept of political freedom is closely connected with the concepts of civil liberties and human rights, which in democratic societies are usually afforded legal protection from the state.

Freedom of religion is a principle that supports the freedom of an individual or community, in public or private, to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance. It also includes the freedom to change religion or not to follow any religion. Freedom of religion is considered by many people and nations to be a fundamental human right. In a country with a state religion, freedom of religion generally means that the government permits religious practices of other sects besides the state religion, and does not persecute believers in other faiths[1]. It also includes the freedom to change religion or not to follow any religion. However severe violations of freedom of religion continue to occur around the world, perpetrated by states, state proxies, and non-state actors.

Definition of Key Terms

Freedom
Otherwise liberty, is the power or right to do as one wants. In politics, liberty consists of the social and political freedoms enjoyed by all citizens. In theology, liberty is freedom from the bondage of sin.

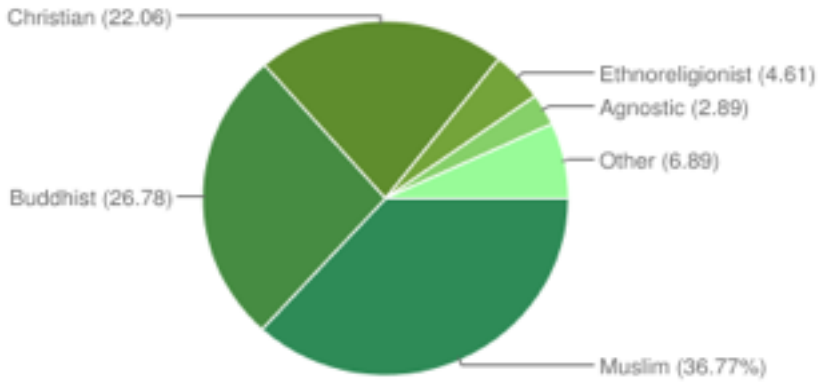
Non-state actors (NSAs)
These are entities that participate or act in international relations, often influential organizations with the power to cause a change even though they do not belong to any established institution of a state.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_religion

East Asia
Or eastern Asia; it is a sub region of the Eurasian continent. It includes China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea and Taiwan.

General Overview

East Asia's religions have been foundational to the political, social and educational development of many of its countries. Today, religious beliefs continue to shape the decisions and practices of people, which can, for example, be seen in Thailand's Buddhist society and Malaysia's Islamic society. The number of Christians is growing throughout the region. For many in these collectivist societies, one's religion is determined by the culture and reinforced through family legacy. New beliefs lend themselves to syncretism as people search for a sense of fulfillment while staying loyal to cultural expectations.[2]



Discrimination based on religion is allowed to flourish in many East Asian countries. In a remarkably short period of time, the realization of religious freedom has achieved broad consensus as an indispensable condition for peace. Faced with widespread reports of religious persecution, non-state actors around the world have responded with laws and policies designed to promote freedom of religion. A 2014 study by the Pew Research Center examined the years 2007 to 2012 and concluded that religious hostilities had increased in every major region of the world except America. The sharpest increase was in the Middle East and North Africa, impacted by the Arab Spring: 29% of all countries had a high or very high level of government restrictions, 39% of countries had seen violence or the threat of violence, used to compel people to adhere to religious norms, 32% of countries experienced harassment of women over religious dress, 25% of countries witnessed mob violence related to religion, 20% of countries experienced religion-related terrorist violence. The study also reported an increase in the level of harassment or intimidation of particular religious groups. Two of the seven major religious groups monitored by the study – Muslims and Jews – experienced six-year highs in the number of countries in which they were harassed by national, provincial or local governments, or by individuals or groups in society. As in previous years, Christians and Muslims – who together make up more than half of the

[2] https://omf.org/nz/learn/people-places/religions/

global population – were harassed in the largest number of countries.

China's constitution provides for freedom of religious belief, but the government actively restricts any religious expression that could potentially undermine its authority. Only five religious groups — Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, Catholics and Protestants[3]— can register with the government and legally hold services. In Burma, religious groups must register with the government, and Burmese citizens must list their faith on official documents. North Korea's constitution guarantees religious freedom, but this right is far from upheld. A Christian group says it dropped 50,000 Bibles over North Korea over the past year, however if caught with one, North Koreans face imprisonment, torture or even death.

Political freedom, which includes the right to vote, the right of free association and the right to free expression, enables individuals to have an opinion about and determine who their rulers shall be and how they shall be ruled. The political landscape in Asia is constantly evolving. As the National Bureau of Asian Research stated, 'political dynamics within Asian states range from vibrant multi-party democracies to some of the world's most closed and repressive regimes. Historical mistrust among states in the region has the potential to explode long dormant rivalries into conflict, while at the same time the proliferation of cooperative multilateral mechanisms offers new opportunities for peace'. The universality of democratic rules should not be taken for granted, as the third wave of democratization has yet to become a region-wide trend in East Asia. The successful promotion of economic development as well as nationalist agenda has led some leaders of non-democratic countries in East Asia to challenge the Western notion of basic human rights and question whether further democratization is necessary or desirable. Thus, they advocate traditional "Asian values," or neo-authoritarianism as an ideological shield against the liberal democratic ideas of Western society. Publicly, East Asian political leaders claim that it is not necessary for developing countries to follow the model of Western development. Across East Asian societies, while traditional values are not immutable to the forces of socio-economic modernization and democratization, they, nevertheless, have demonstrated its staying power despite of rapid pace of modernization and divergent experiences of democratization. The living experiences under different political systems do not seem to make much imprint on people's value-orientation in the domain of personal ethnics and social norms. It was pointed out that when established political cultures engage with certain pressure that forces it to change, a specific reaction will occur. It is found that East Asian citizens think of democracy in difference ways[4]. The liberal democratic notion has not yet taken hold in East Asia soil. It is also found that overall speaking education plays a key role in shaping citizens' notion of democracy despite of the lingering influence of traditional values. The causal mechanism of this link is related to increase in political involvement and media exposure. Education, political involvement and media exposure do increase the probability of acquiring a more sophisticated understanding of democracy. However, acquisitions of liberal democratic notion also

[3] https://freedomdeclared.org/facts/

[4] http://www.eastasiabarometer.org/publications//8a548217eb4a131e180e8a81c7da1233.pdf

foster stronger commitment to democracy. This means forces of modernization facilitate the strengthening of democratic legitimacy, not just through Press, transformative power on value but also on cognition.

Major Parties Involved

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief
This organization aims at raising awareness and profile of international freedom of religion or belief as a human right among parliamentarians, media, governments and the general public.

Freedom House
An American Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that analyzes the challenges to freedom, advocates for greater political rights and civil liberties, and supports frontline activists to defend human rights and promote watchdog organizations dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the democratic changes.

China
China's government censors press, publications and researches. Human rights are often abused, which is justified to 'guarantee social stability'. China's society is very restricted and lacks political freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

North Korea
The country is officially an atheist state, however the government carries on intervening on the individual ability of a person to choose his or her religious beliefs. They brutally deal with the opponents of the government, as well as with people who manifest religions that are unaccepted by the regime.

Timeline of Events

1981	Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.
Since 2011	East Asia Summit Growing religious intolerance has led to a rise in attacks by Islamic militants against religious minorities, sometimes resulting in their displacement.

19 November 2011	East Asia Summit
October 2012	Rabat Plan of Action
19 September 2015	International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

In previous years, several attempts to solve the issue of political and religious freedom in East Asia have taken place. Many countries and organizations from all over the world engaged themselves to help in finding solutions to this problem. One of them was the Rabat Plan of Action, created by the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). It aimed to prohibit advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. It recommended the national adoption of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislations with preventive and punitive actions to effectively combat incitement to hatred[5], as well as the empowerment of religious minorities and vulnerable groups. At the East Asia Summit (EAS) held on November 19 in Bali, Indonesia, President Obama of the United States of America and other world leaders discussed the importance of cooperation on the region's most pressing political and security challenges, as other issues. Another attempt to solve the issue is the following, quoted from the International Religious Freedom Report for 2014 by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, U. S Department of State: 'We urged Chinese authorities to take steps to reduce tensions, uphold China's international commitments to protect religious freedom and other universal human rights, and reassess counterproductive policies in Xinjiang and other ethnic areas. The United States also strongly support the preservation of Tibet's unique religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions and the protection of human rights for Tibetans in the People's Republic of China.'

Possible Solutions

Issues highlighted above are merely the tip of the iceberg. In East Asian countries and other religious states around Asia, discrimination against religious minorities and in effect the curbs on their freedom of expression are constitutionalized. It is important to develop an understanding regarding the direction of future advocacy of various organizations in the context of religious freedoms, in order to understand what role the internet is playing and can play in promoting freedom of expression and religious toleration online, to raise awareness about Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of

[5] http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/TheRabatPlanofAction.aspx

advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred, to generate global support for the region[6] from research, think tanks, academia, donors and human rights friendly governments to help reverse the negative trends on basic freedoms.

Political freedom is intrinsically valuable, because the opportunity to have a say in one's community is fundamental to human existence and valuable by itself. Also, it has a constructive value because through dialogue, discussion and debate, people can come to understand what their real needs are. Moreover, political freedom has instrumental value, particularly in poor societies. It makes governments accountable and responsive to ordinary citizens, protect people from poor governance, help governments to take correct decisions and by providing a space for people to come together and act publicly, they help ensure the provision of essential services and monitoring their functioning[7].

Useful documents

Resolution for freedom of religion or believe:
http://ippforb.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/NYC-Resolution.pdf

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:
http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx

Study Guide: Freedom of Religion or Belief:
http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/studyguides/religion.html

East Asian Barometer:
http://www.eastasiabarometer.org/publications//8a548217eb4a131e180e8a81c7da1233.pdf

[6] http://www.freedomofexpression.asia/about/

[7] https://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy/article_1431.jsp