

PLATFORM  
FREEDOM OF  
RELIGION OR BELIEF  
WORLDWIDE

# FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN A TURBULENT WORLD

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

APRIL 2024



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# INTRODUCTION

## The Platform (PGW)

The Platform Freedom of Religion or Belief Worldwide (*Platform Godsdienstvrijheid Wereldwijd*, PGW) was formally established as a Dutch foundation in 2010. It is inclusive, as it aims at bringing together views from different religions and non-religious beliefs and is politically neutral.

Since its establishment, the Platform has been in close touch with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and helped in providing a non-governmental answer to the Ministry's need for information on the best ways of promoting freedom of religion or belief and, more broadly, its objective to enhance religious and belief literacy in foreign and development policies. Since 2019, the Platform works closely together with the Special Envoy on Religion or Belief, a new post created by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. In particular, members of the board of the Platform participate in the meetings of the Special Envoy with NGOs in this area.

Apart from preparing recommendations to the MFA, the Platform organises roundtables on specific themes, mainly focusing on the various elements of freedom of religion or belief, and on the role religion or belief plays in everyday life.

## Why this report?

The promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief constitutes one of the main priorities of the Netherlands MFA, and similarly, since the adoption of the EU Guidelines on this subject, also for the EU at large. Naturally, EU-delegations and the embassies from Member States are vital sources of information for policymakers. In addition, NGOs working with partner organisations in third countries on human rights and development projects often provide insights and networks that are valuable as additional sources of information for the EU-Commission, EEAS and national MFAs.

International NGOs and think tanks continue to report on serious violations of the freedom of religion or belief. Organisations like the International Humanist and Ethical Union, Open Doors, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and the PEW Research Center need to be commended with their regular, mostly annual reports on the situation with regard to FoRB world-wide.

Against this background, it may seem there is less of a need for yet another report on this subject. Yet, the Platform was inspired by the reports of the network of Members of the European Parliament who are particularly committed to the protection of FoRB, (formally called the European Parliament intergroup on FoRB and Religious Tolerance). In particular, the Annual Report 2017 showed that the EU and Member States can make progress in the promotion and protection of FoRB through targeted actions, often in close co-operation with local religious and belief organisations and their leaders. The advantage of this type of report has been that it does not just report on the violations, but also offers recommendations for action in those countries, where the EU and its Member States can actually make a difference. The report examined the relations between the EU with the third countries concerned, such as association agreements, trade and development co-operation, and drew conclusions with regard to the 'relevance' factor. That report proved to be of value not only for the EU-institutions but also for national MFAs, and was presented both in the EP and in the Council (Working Party on Human Rights).

For MEPs it is difficult to find the time and resources for compiling such extensive reports. Intergroups of the EP as such lack financial and human resources, and are completely dependent on the resources of their Members, which are by definition limited, considering the heavy workload for MEPs and their assistants. It does not therefore have to come as a surprise that during the legislative term 2019-2024, the intergroup on FoRB&RT limited itself to a more concise report based on input from important NGOs in this area. The report was useful for raising awareness, but unfortunately it did not have a similar impact as did the 2017 report.

At national level, in the Netherlands the Platform noted a similar trend: NGOs publish their reports on violations of FoRB by third countries, and at least twice a year the MFA organises thematic meetings with interested NGOs, but the connection between the severity of the violations and the relevance of these third countries for the Netherlands (and vice versa), is yet missing.

Although also for the Platform it has been a relatively costly and time-consuming exercise to engage in producing its own report, similar to the 2017 report of the intergroup, its conviction that such a report would fill the gap between existing reports and the specific needs of MFAs and EU-institutions led to the conclusion that at least an effort should be made.

## Various parts of the report

As the intergroup had done for its 2017 report, the Platform contracted a consortium of academics, co-ordinated as before, by Mauro Gatti (University of Bologna), and consisting in addition of Maurits Berger (University of Leiden), and Jelle Creemers (ETF Leuven). The researchers analysed the situation in 41 key countries, selected in accordance with the relevance factor in combination with the severity of problematic issues or violations of FoRB. The methodology followed by the researchers has been described extensively in their report on the situation in the 41 key countries (Annex I).

The Platform itself has vetted and narrowed down the number of key countries to 17 on the basis of the scope for practical recommendations. The Platform is particularly grateful for the help of one of the co-chairs of the EP intergroup on FoRB&RT, MEP Anja Haga, who requested the EP Research Service to prepare a detailed survey of existing relations of the EU and its Member States with the 17 selected countries. The EPRS used only publicly available material from the EU institutions, but managed to provide a most useful insight, and thus forms, together with the academic study, the basis for our country recommendations. It has been attached as Annex II.



# HUMAN RIGHTS IN A TURBULENT WORLD

The Platform is aware of the many challenges the EU and its Member States face, when it comes to the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Violence has become more wide-spread and respect for international humanitarian law has been challenged, despite the good work of institutions like the International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Court. Against this background, policies and actions aimed at the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms may seem to have less urgency, especially since they are challenged by some third countries as being the reflection of western culture. What holds for human rights policies in general, may hold even more for FoRB: if the lives of people are threatened by violence, if torture, including rape, is used as a weapon during conflicts, why do we need to prioritise FoRB?

## Priority-setting in general

A good starting point for finding answers to the issue of priority setting is Art. 3, paragraph 5 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU):

*“In its relations with the wider world, the Union shall uphold and promote its values and interests and contribute to the protection of its citizens. It shall contribute to peace, security, the sustainable development of the Earth, solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child, as well as to the strict observance and the development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter.”*

Thus, the TEU reflects the most precious elements of European integration and what makes the EU different from certain other international players: ever since its inception after World War II, European integration has always been inspired by the desire to become a peaceful area, characterised by respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms for all its residents. And, extending these ideals to its relations with third countries, the desire to promote a peaceful world based on the UN Charter and subsequent treaties, which together constitute the body of international law aimed at guaranteeing respect for the rights of all, irrespective of race, gender, religion or belief, etc.

If these values were to reflect only the western culture, it seems odd that the TEU puts the UN Charter and international law first. UN Conventions and Declarations have been codified in a transparent and accessible manner: hence the relatively large number of ratifications and signatures of these instruments by States covering all continents of the world. It is no coincidence that the thesis that human rights and fundamental freedoms reflect the western culture, is especially put forward by authoritarian governments and dictatorships. For the EU, it is clear that human rights are indivisible and universal: this principle is not only laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but is also reflected in more recent instruments and jurisprudence<sup>1</sup>.

The text of Art. 3, paragraph 5 does not rank the various objectives: human rights are no less important than peace building, sustainable development is not less important than trade. In practice, there are, however, tensions: especially due to the violence in neighbouring countries of the EU it is logical that security issues largely determine the political agenda. At the same time though, such violence goes hand in hand with the crushing of human rights and fundamental freedoms: in times of war, human rights defenders are seen as troublemakers. Faced with terrorist attacks, it takes a courageous government to act with dignity. If the EU were to be seen as yet another actor more interested in its own powers than in the defence of the values enshrined in the TEU, it would lose its credibility. Hence, also in its external security policies, it needs to stand up for human rights and freedoms.

Similarly, for EU-delegations and embassies of its Member States, economic relations and the facilitation of European businesses have been given a much more prominent place than, let us say, twenty years ago. Of course, there is nothing against defending the economic interests, as the TEU points out, but it should always be remembered that without promoting sustainable development of the Earth or without promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms, the balance is at risk of being distorted.

In practice, this means that it is quite understandable that also in their external policies, the EU and its Member States pay specific attention to security and economic interests, but the importance of these interests may not be an excuse for giving up on the protection of human rights and the observance and development of international law.

## Religion or belief

It serves no purpose ranking human rights and fundamental freedoms. Since these are indivisible, no human right is more important than another. Civil and political rights are just as important as economic and social rights: what good does it do to have the right to build a house of worship, if there is no food, or suitable housing?

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<sup>1</sup> The academic report contains a list of relevant UN-Conventions and the state of signatures and ratifications thereof.



Having said this, the freedom of religion or belief is definitely a special freedom: it has often been referred to as the litmus test for the respect of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. This has to do with the fact that freedom to manifest one's religion or belief is multi-faceted: it includes elements of freedom of expression, of association, and many more.

Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly: as stated in the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, religion or belief, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life. Violations of FoRB, therefore, touch upon everyday life of those who profess either.

Without diminishing the importance of other human rights and fundamental freedoms, these considerations are in the Platform's opinion, sufficient reason for specific attention to FoRB: as litmus test, and because it concerns persons' conception of life. The Special Envoys on Religion or Belief, of the European Commission and of many Member States, reflect these considerations that are valid even or rather especially in a turbulent world, like today's.

There is yet another reason for special attention for religion or belief: whereas all world religions proclaim love and peace, teachings can also be abused for political reasons. Especially since religion or belief is so fundamental for one's conception of life, it may become an instrument for political objectives: the instrumentalisation of religion or belief can be seen in every part of the world.

Whereas many European countries have experienced various degrees of secularisation, and non-religious beliefs have become more important, for most third countries, this does not hold. On the contrary, in many countries State and religion are not separated and religious and non-religious minorities are often in jeopardy. In order for EU-delegations and embassies of the Member States to fully understand the dynamics of the third country concerned, they have to have what is called 'religious literacy'. They should not shy away from contacts with religious and belief leaders, since the networks of the latter are often extended and powerful.

Religious and belief leaders cannot become instruments themselves, and they cannot build peace, when politicians and diplomats are not capable of doing so; but they can take a stand against abuse of their religion or belief for political purposes. And they do so: the signs of hope which are mentioned in the country recommendations of this report often involve the efforts of religious and belief organisations and their leaders. Also, religious and belief organisations are frequently engaged in reconciliation procedures: once peace has been re-established, they can and want to help in restoring mutual respect and understanding. Working together in humanitarian projects is a good example of such activities: actively building bridges, rather than using words only. Without religious literacy the EU and its Member States cannot understand third countries, in which religion or belief is of extreme importance, and they miss out on the signs of hope that may be there.

## Institutional aspects

In democracies, political priorities are by definition dynamic, as the expectations of the electorate vary over time. Sometimes, it is a financial crisis that dominates the agenda, at other times it is asylum and immigration, climate change, poverty reduction or military security. That is only normal, as the world around us changes accordingly. Especially since priorities tend to change, it is important to anchor values that are always guiding the EU and its Member States also institutionally.

This has been the rationale behind the appointment of Special Representatives or Ambassadors on Human Rights. Similarly, it was the rationale for the creation of focal points for religion or belief, be it in the form of Special Envoys or otherwise. And, as far as the European Parliament is concerned, it was the reason for creating the intergroup on FoRB & RT.

The 2017 and 2021 reports of the intergroup already contain a range of valuable recommendations for all EU-institutions. Irrespective of the new challenges in light of the violent conflicts, also near the borders of the EU, we maintain that these recommendations remain valid and shall not repeat all of them in this report. Instead, we limit ourselves to lifting out a few, vital recommendations. As also requested by the European Parliament in its Resolution of 3 May 2022 on the persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion, a public review of the implementation of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief is essential in order to monitor the progress made and to take stock of best practices in this regard. Also, the recommendations by the intergroup with regard to the special training of EEAS-staff on religious literacy and the support for inter-faith and intra-faith co-operation through community-based initiatives are particularly relevant. In this regard, it is unclear whether the GERIS (Global Exchange on Religion in Society) programme, that was concluded in 2022, had been evaluated. In our view, this unique programme should be given new dynamics. Moreover, the strengthening of the position of the Special Envoy is especially relevant in view of the European elections: the new European Commission should see this as one of its priorities and not leave the position vacant, as was the case during part of the past years; instead, it should draw upon the experience of the current Special Envoy, Frans van Daele, and increase both human and financial resources, and provide for institutional arrangements safeguarding optimal co-operation between the Special Envoy and EEAS, in particular the EU Special Representative for Human Rights.

Since the values on which the EU is based are paramount and have been given a prominent place in the TEU, they themselves should never be politicised. These values are not the prerogative of any particular political group: they hold for everyone and should be of concern to everyone. FoRB protects adherents of religions, big or small, and of non-religious beliefs,

Iranging from humanists to atheists. The Platform, therefore, regrets the fact that the intergroup lost support from some political groups during the current legislature: it should be as inclusive as possible. Hence, our call for not only a renewal of the intergroup's mandate after the European elections (on 24 June 2024), but also for a broader base, so that it can be clearly seen as representing FoRB in its broadest form.

nstitutional arrangements do not mean everything, but in a turbulent world with so many challenges in different areas, they can prevent values such as embodied in FoRB, from losing political attention. If that happened, it would be a violation of the gist of the TEU itself, which puts so much emphasis on the values on which the EU is based.



# SIGNS OF HOPE

Despite the difficult times for human rights in general, community projects organised by faith-based organisations continue to be further developed. These signs of hope are included in this report, as they are in line with its overall objective, i.e. the provision of practical recommendations for Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Development Agencies and EU-institutions. The examples show that religious and belief communities continue to work together, even if they are surrounded by hostility and violence. These efforts should receive our full support.

## Kerk in Actie – Shared Futures

Kerk in Actie is part of the Dutch Protestant Church. Its programme ‘Shared Futures’ is defined as follows:

*“Shared Futures is the name of the program in which we enable young people and their communities to build their own futures and to contribute to the common future. Together, youth from different faith groups are trained and supported to improve their individual employment perspectives and to improve the social cohesion in their community.”*

The programme is carried out in several countries. For this report, its activities in Pakistan are particularly relevant:

*“Although Islam is the majority religion in Pakistan, it may be called religiously diverse because of the variety of Muslim sects (such as Sunnis, Shia, Sufis and Ahmadiyyah) and religious minorities (such as Hindus, Christians and Sikhs) inhabiting the country. The Shared Futures project in Pakistan is implemented in two areas: in the urban setting of Islamabad and Rawalpindi and in the rural districts of Rahim Yar Khan and Ghokti, South Punjab.*

*The South Punjab districts are amongst the least developed in the country. The inhabitants of this rural area struggle against poverty, have little access to education and economic opportunities, and Hindu and Christian communities suffer severe forms of discrimination. The ‘twin cities’ of Islamabad and Rawalpindi are home to a variety of ethnicities, religions and lifestyles. Despite this cosmopolitan outlook, however, members of minority religions mostly live in segregated semi-formal settlements and have little interaction with other faith communities.*

*In both areas, Shared Futures partners Rural Education and Economic Development Society (REEDS), and the Pakistan Mission Society (PMS) provide vocational training and business support to unemployed youth who might otherwise feel tempted to join criminal or extremist groups.*

*What discerns the Shared Futures approach from other programs targeting unemployed youth is that it also seeks to establish business relations across different religious groups. New interfaith relations are emerging already at the vocational institutes where students from different faith groups share classes, write CVs and develop business proposals.*

*Although most youth seek individual employment following the training, in some cases students from different faith groups decide to establish a business start-up together. Thus, local businesses and shops begin to emerge where members of different faith groups mingle and meet. Such interfaith trade and business locations may ignite a conflict transformation process in the wider community. They increase the familiarity between faith groups and help to reduce intergroup anxieties and prejudices.”*

## **Cordaid – Faith-for-Action Network**

Cordaid is a Dutch organisation which defines itself, inter alia, as follows:

*“We have emerged from the Christian social traditions, and we are a founding member of Caritas Internationalis, the worldwide network of Catholic relief organisations, and CIDSE, an umbrella organisation for Catholic development agencies from Europe and North America.”*

Cordaid drew our attention to the activities of the Faith to Action network:

*“Faith to Action Network is a global interfaith network with members from Bahá’í, Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Muslim, and African Traditional religions. The Network promotes mutual learning and increased interfaith collaboration between religious organizations as well as faith-based organizations, governments and other stakeholders to advance family health and well-being; women’s rights and gender justice; and peaceful, just and inclusive communities. We amplify faith voices, conduct advocacy and communicate messages for change, including social and behavioural change.”*

The Faith to Action network has members in several of the key countries mentioned in this report and can be considered excellent interlocutors for inter-faith activities. Together with other NGOs the network also organised the 2023 Inter-Religious Convention which was held in December 2023 in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://conferences.faithtoactionnetwork.org/about-us/>

## Religions for Peace

Religions for Peace is an international NGO bringing together religious leaders from all over the world. It was established more than 50 years ago and has a track record of Inter-Religious Councils<sup>3</sup>, which were founded in many of the key countries in this report (e.g., Nigeria, Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan). The emphasis rests on engaging in joint activities, often of a humanitarian nature, bringing members of different religions and beliefs together, thus promoting mutual understanding and respect. For EU-delegations and embassies of the Member States these Councils may offer interesting channels for reaching out, also in regions which are less accessible for other networks.

## Open Doors – Bridging projects

Open Doors works – in general through local churches – in more than 70 countries, supplying Bibles, training church leaders, providing practical support and emergency relief, and supporting Christians who suffer persecution and discrimination for their faith. A type of project aimed at the community is called a bridge project.

Bridging projects can take on many forms and are selected in consultation with persecuted Christian communities. As the name suggests, these projects are specifically aimed at building a bridge between Christians and other faith communities. For example: in Ethiopia in a village with tension between different faith communities, a bridge school started by the Protestant church is helping the church to be a valued contributor to the wider community, the different believers are treated with greater tolerance and children receive a good education.

## Kerk in Nood (ACN - Aid to Church in Need)

Kerk in Nood is the Netherlands member of ACN International and supports Christians world-wide, wherever they are persecuted or repressed or are in need of pastoral care. It does so through information, prayers and actions. ACN International is a Catholic relief organisation with offices in 23 countries. It has been established in 1947 and supports every year 5.000 projects world-wide.<sup>4</sup>

Of particular relevance for the country recommendations are its activities in the Central African Republic and in Pakistan. On the role of the Catholic Church relating to peace-building in the CAR, ACN shared recent interviews with Cardinal Nzapalainga who stated, inter alia, the following:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rfp.org/where-we-work/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://kerkinnood.nl/over-ons/missie/>

*'We joined with other religious leaders in the country, with pastors and imams, and proclaimed loud and clear that this is not a religious conflict. We have always stood united against the risk of this turning into a confessional war, and this position has borne fruit. As religious leaders we are like parents in a family, we must lead by example. Our citizens can see that we continued to be on good terms with each other and that we always continued to say that the divisions in our country were being imposed from outside. Our efforts at peacebuilding were made easier by the fact that in Central African society many families are mixed, and everybody has a cousin, an uncle or somebody close who belongs to another religion, but is still part of the same family tree. We witnessed beautiful moments of brotherhood in Bangui, in which young Muslims helped to rebuild churches and young Christians helped to rebuild mosques. At the end of the day, even though this crisis has been terrible, it has had the positive effect of promoting unity among us.'*

In Pakistan, the positive practical effects of interfaith dialogue were reflected in the following account:

*'In the case of Gazi Salahuddin John, a Shia Muslim who regularly attends interfaith dialogue meetings in Hyderabad, organized by fr. Shahzad Khokhar, a Franciscan friar who has been supported by Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). Gazi's fight became very real in March 2023, when he single-handedly stopped a mob targeting a Hindu family in his neighbourhood that had been accused of blasphemy. He has since received several awards for his noble act.*

*During a meeting of the interfaith dialogue group on 16 March 2023, Gazi recounted the incident in detail to a delegation of ACN. "A Hindu had been unjustly accused of burning the Quran. More and more men gathered in front of the building where the family lived, but they could not enter because the door was closed. They then tried to place a ladder against the building. There was also someone with a gun, but I was able to take that out of his hands."*

*Asked about his courage, Gazi says he felt the strength within himself to stand up to them, illustrating the situation with a few verses that he learned during interfaith dialogue meetings. "I once thought religion was something I do, but it is what I am. I once thought interfaith dialogue was something we do, but it is what we are. I once thought diversity was something we were, but it is what we do. We are all one, and brothers.'*





# COUNTRY RECOMMENDATIONS



# ALGERIA



## FoRB situation - 6 (Problematic issues)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report are related to:

- Conversion and the right to practice a religion is granted by the law, but family law limits the opportunities for converts. The values of Islam and Islamic studies are compulsory;
- Proselytism of Muslims is punishable by years of imprisonment;
- The practice of religion is controlled by the government and limits non-Islamic religious beliefs and gatherings;
- Family law and formally neutral laws are applied with discriminatory effect against non-Muslims;
- There are incidents of violence against converts.

## Recommendations:

The EU cooperates with Algeria in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Association Agreement. The EU-Algeria Partnership priorities include governance, participatory democracy, the promotion and defence of fundamental rights, enhancing the role of women in society and reinforcing the role of civil society. Refugees protection is an integral part of EU-humanitarian projects.

This leads to the following recommendations to be taken up in the context of the dialogue with the Algerian government, and as part of the EU's projects on the ground:

- Promote the right to worship and make it easier for minority religions and beliefs to have a place of worship or gathering and reopen the closed places of worship;
- Release prisoners of conscience and withdraw fines and prison sentences for converts or people belonging to other (non)religious minorities;
- Promote dialogue between different religions and beliefs, to counter discrimination and violence;
- Continue humanitarian help for refugees – many of them coming from sub-Saharan countries – in cooperation with faith based actors;
- Address the discriminatory practices in family law and other laws.

# BANGLADESH



## FoRB Situation: 7 (Problematic issues)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report relate to:

- Lack of protection of converted Muslims from threats and violence;
- Arbitrary prosecution and harsh punishment of those who disseminate information that allegedly hurts religious values. Restrictions of activities by NGOs who receive (partly) funding from abroad;
- Disadvantaging women belonging to certain communities in the application of family laws based on their religion or belief;
- Insufficient protection of members of religious and belief minorities against violence from extremist groups.

## Recommendations:

In 2001, the EU and Bangladesh concluded a Cooperation Agreement. Trade relations are based on unilateral trade preferences granted by the EU since 2001 under the GSP Everything but Arms, system. Bangladesh therefore benefits from duty-free, quota-free EU access. Under the Cooperation Agreement the EU-Bangladesh Joint Commission and Sub-group on Human Rights offer opportunities for discussion of human rights and good governance related issues. Furthermore, the EU offers substantial amounts of Official Development Aid to Bangladesh.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- Pay (more) attention to the protection of Muslim converts and members of religious minorities in general against threats and violence from extremist groups, as part of the human rights dialogue;
- Continue to focus on freedom of expression and of the media, including the potential abuse of legislation on the prohibition of religious insult;
- Include, within the gender projects of the EU, discussions of the effects of family law for the position of women.

# CHINA



## FoRB Situation: 10 (Severe violations)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report relate to:

- Complete State control over religious groups and their organisations; ban on certain religious groups; requirement of atheism for members of the army and the Chinese Communist Party;
- Unregistered religious groups are deprived of any manifestation of their religion or belief; no religious education is allowed;
- Uyghurs and other Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, underground Catholics, house church Protestants, Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God are perceived as agents of foreign influence and are severely persecuted.

The Vatican and the Chinese government concluded and renewed an agreement on the appointment of bishops, but China continues to install bishops selected by the State.

## Recommendations:

The EU and China are committed to a comprehensive strategic partnership, as expressed in the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation. The 2019 Joint Communication EU-China – A strategic Outlook reiterates the need to work with China as a donor and partner. The 2019 Joint Summit statement calls for deepening of the cooperation, inter alia, on human rights.

Following the worsening of the general human rights situation in China, in 2021, the EU imposed sanctions under the EU Global Human Rights Sanction Regime. Thereupon China suspended the EU-China Human Rights Dialogues in 2021 and 2022.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- Despite the fact that the Sanctions Regime has already been put in place, and the EU's strategic and economic interests in maintaining relations with China, the EU should consider the establishment of additional, targeted sanctions in relation to the violations of FoRB in view of the severe violations of the FoRB;
- At the same time, the EU and its Member States should seek co-operation with the Catholic Church and other religious organisations, still active in China, in order to keep monitoring the rights of their adherents and to seek ways of improving the situation on the ground;
- On the basis of the aforementioned contacts, demarches could be undertaken on behalf of individual members of the persecuted religious groups.

# DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC)



## FoRB Situation: 2 (Minor concerns)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report relate to:

- Lack of protection from violence in the Eastern part of the country, in particular violence directed against Christian communities by the Allied Democratic Forces (connected to Islamic State);
- Efforts of the authorities to expel the Batwa people from their ancestral lands, thus preventing them from pursuing their traditional way of life, cultural and religious practices.

Although the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief is protected by the Constitution for all religions or beliefs, in 2016 the government of the DRC concluded a framework agreement with the Holy See, followed by a second agreement on the status of the Catholic Church in 2022. The Catholic Church has engaged in peacebuilding activities, for instance, through justice education and mediation efforts between opposition and government groups.

## Recommendations:

The DRC benefits from duty-free, quota-free EU access; furthermore, the EU offers considerable financial support to the Armed Forces of the DRC (under the European Peace Facility) as well as to programmes and projects regarding, inter alia, the justice sector, media, human rights defenders and gender.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- Since the protection against violence in the Eastern part of the DRC remains the main challenge, the EU and its Member States should not hesitate working together with representatives of the Catholic Church who are engaged in peacebuilding activities. The networks of religious leaders may often be reaching out to areas which are more difficult to enter for national and international peacebuilding missions. Therefore, dialogue with the Catholic Church on how to protect the population, and, in particular, women and children, as well as Christian communities, should be intensified.
- The plight of indigenous groups, such as the Batwa people, should become part of the political dialogue of the EU and its Member States with the DRC.



## FoRB Situation: 5 (Problematic issues)

The problematic issues mentioned in the academic report relate to:

- Changing of religion is allowed, but only generally accepted when converting to Islam. Belonging to another religion or to no religion has repercussions in family law, ID cards and many other aspects of life;
- Manifestation of a religious conviction (other than Islam) is easily criminalized and can result in detention and conviction;
- Permission for the building or reconstruction of churches or other non-Islamic religious buildings has improved but is still limited;
- Discrimination of minority religions and beliefs in religious personal status laws and work and career opportunities continues to exist;
- Violence by Islamist militant groups have been met by military action; protection is however limited to institutions and does not cover persons individually.

## Recommendations:

The EU cooperates with Egypt in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and Association Agreement (2004). Under president Sisi a National Human Rights strategy was implemented, which resulted for example in several ministries establishing human rights departments. Implementation in the legislative track is however limited. In 2022, the EU and Egypt adopted new Partnership Priorities, reaffirming a shared commitment to the universal values of democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights and the strengthening of dialogue and cooperation on these issues.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- As part of the human rights dialogue with the Egyptian authorities, and, in particular, of its cooperation projects with the authorities and civil society, the EU should give more priority to FoRB-related issues;
- In particular, it should further a dialogue on steps towards the elimination of discriminatory elements in family and other laws, so that all citizens – irrespective of their religion of belief – are equal under law. In this respect, it should raise the need for removing religious identity from the ID-card, as the option to insert a dash also leads to discrimination in practice;

- It should aim at convincing the Egyptian authorities to make the permission and appeal process easier in respect of the building or reconstructing of churches and other non-Muslim houses of worship and gathering;
- The EU should include in its projects activities stimulating dialogue between the various religions and beliefs, to address misconceptions and discrimination and build social cohesion and promote open conversations about the role of religions and beliefs, and civil society at large in promoting and protecting FoRB.



# INDIA



## FoRB Situation: 8 (Severe violations)

The violations identified in the academic report relate to:

- In spite of the guarantees of fundamental freedoms in the Constitution, over ten states prohibit religious conversion;
- The penal code criminalizes offences related to religion, such as insulting religion or religious beliefs. The expression of non-Hindu religious or non-religious principles and practices can lead to harassment, threats and violence, against which authorities offer no or insufficient protection;
- Registration is required for (and increasingly withheld from) religious organisations receiving foreign funding; religious organisations conducting social work and receiving foreign funding are also required to get special permission, resulting in many Western NGO's leaving the country;
- Extension of religious prescriptions (such as the prohibition of slaughtering cows) into general law, thus creating grounds for accusations against religious and belief minorities.

## Recommendations:

The EU and India maintain strong relations, built on the 1994 EU-India Cooperation Agreement and the 2004 EU-India Strategic Partnership. Relations are reflected in the size of trade and investment. In July 2022, the 10th edition of the EU-India Human Rights Dialogue was held and included discussions on freedom of religion or belief.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- For the EU and Member States, India is a major economic and strategic partner. This requires a balancing act, as the government of India is well aware of its leverage. Nevertheless, through their political dialogue, the EU and Member States should continue to address concerns relating to the position of religious and belief minorities in the country;
- The restrictions imposed upon organisations receiving foreign funding, make it more difficult for the human rights programmes of the EU and Member States to engage in direct financial support for civil society, even though such projects on gender rights were still possible. Ways should be sought to convince the authorities that for the stability of the country, dialogue among diverse religious and belief communities and organisations is vital and that financial support for such activities by the EU and Member States should equally not be hindered;

- Specific attention could be given to the academic community: programmes could be funded to facilitate academic discussions of relations between State and religion or belief, and the negative effects on FoRB of criminalising insulting religion or religious beliefs, as well as of anti-conversion laws. The results of such discussions could then be channelled through to the Annual Human Rights Dialogue.



## FoRB Situation: 4 (Problematic issues)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report are related to:

- Legal facilitation of conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, as opposed to legal obstacles (lack of registration, repercussions to matters of family law and inheritance rights) for conversion of Muslims to other religions or beliefs. Societal pressures against leaving the Muslim faith, including threats and violence;
- State persecution of atheism;
- Some religious groups, including the Bahá'ís, Zoroastrian and Kaka'I communities are not permitted to officially register as such and are thus excluded from legal protection and privileges;
- Displaced members of religious minorities are hindered to return to their homes and communities.

Iraq's major challenges relate to securing a stable democratic system due to the fact that relations between the Shi'ite majority and Sunni minority in the country remain tense. In the Kurdistan region of Iraq the conflict between the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan undermines the relative stability of this part of Iraq.

## Recommendations:

Relations of the EU and its Member States with Iraq are based on the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, signed in 2012. This Agreement aims at strengthening political and economic relations, including co-operation in the field of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

This leads to the following recommendation:

- Prioritise the discussion on the respect for the rights of adherents of all religions or beliefs, in particular concerning religious and belief minorities;
- Pay particular attention to the alleged persecution of atheists;
- Include religious literacy in the projects on Security Sector Reform.



## FoRB Situation: 4 (Problematic issues)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report are related to:

- Limitations of the right to convert from Islam to other religions as a consequence of the legal recognition of Muslim family law for Muslims;
- Certain limitations to the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief for non-Muslims;
- Discriminatory practices as a consequence of the application of the Muslim family code;
- Lack of protection against violence against Muslims who converted into Christianity.

Although the situation for non-Muslims in Jordan is therefore not ideal, it must be added that in practice enforcement of potentially discriminatory laws is rare.

At the same time, the Jordan monarchy has a track record of stimulating inter-religious dialogue and mutual respect for religions or beliefs. In September 2010 King Abdullah II took the initiative for the World Interfaith Harmony Week, which was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly, and is still observed each year, the first week of February. Also the activities of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, persist, despite the unstable situation in the region (Syria, Israel-Gaza, terrorist groups etc.).

## Recommendations:

Based on the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Association Agreement, the EU and its Member States have developed strong relations with Jordan: not only in terms of trade, but also by supporting projects aimed at furthering good governance, the rule of law and human rights in general.

However, considering the long-standing interest of Jordan in contributing to interfaith dialogue and respect, more could be done in these areas:

- Promoting dialogue on the role of religious and belief based institutions and their leaders in promoting durable peace in the region;
- Furthering humanitarian assistance to refugees, in particular to those from Syria, in co-operation with religion or belief based NGOs;
- Involving religious and belief based organisations in countering extremist and terrorist tendencies, especially whenever the latter claim to be based on religious prescriptions;
- Initiating a free and open discussion among academic and religious scholars on potentially discriminatory practices concerning conversion, family law, and the observance in public of religious and belief prescriptions.



## FoRB Situation: 6 (Problematic issues)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report are related to:

- Limitations of the right to convert from Islam to other religions as a consequence of the legal recognition of Muslim family and inheritance law for Muslims;
- limitations to the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief for non-Muslims, in particular through the wide interpretation of the notion of proselytism, which is considered a crime;
- enforcement of religious prescriptions, such as the observance of the Ramadan, through the Penal Code;
- other religious groups than those based on Islam or Judaism have the right to register as associations, although some minority groups reported difficulties in registering;
- discriminatory practices as a consequence of the application of the Muslim family code.

At the same time, the Moroccan government has a track record of stimulating inter-religious dialogue and mutual respect for religions or beliefs. In 2012, the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, was adopted under the auspices of the OHCHR, defining a high threshold for defining restrictions on freedom of expression. This initiative paved the way for further initiatives, such as the Beirut Declaration and the Faith for Rights commitments. In 2017, OHCHR organised in co-operation with the Government of Morocco the Rabat+5 symposium, defining further actions in the context of Faith for Rights. In June 2023, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Moroccan parliament organised the Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, in Marrakesh.

## Recommendations:

Based on the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Association Agreement and, in particular, the 2019 Joint Political Declaration, the EU and its Member States have developed strong relations with Morocco: not only in terms of trade, but also by supporting projects aimed at furthering good governance, the rule of law and human rights in general. Moreover, the EU also supported projects addressing irregular migration and forced displacement.

However, considering the long-standing interest of Morocco in contributing to interfaith dialogue and respect, more could be done in the following areas:

- Strengthening the implementation of the Faith for Rights commitments, thus recognising the role of religious and belief organisations in promoting and protecting the rights of minorities and vulnerable persons;
- Furthering humanitarian assistance to refugees, in particular those from sub-Saharan Africa, Libya and Sudan, in co-operation with religion or belief based NGOs;
- Involving religious and belief based organisations in countering extremist and terrorist tendencies, especially whenever the latter claim to be based on religious prescriptions;
- Initiating a free and open discussion among academic and religious scholars on potentially discriminatory practices concerning conversion, family law, and the observance in public of religious and belief prescriptions.

# MYANMAR



## FoRB Situation: 8 (Severe violations)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report relate to:

- Limitation of the right to convert;
- Wide interpretation of 'blasphemy' which is punishable by law; arbitrary convictions based on these provisions, without evidence of deliberate and malicious content (as is required under national law);
- Manifestation of their religion or belief by unregistered religious groups is punishable by law; registration procedures are chaotic and delayed;
- The government supports Buddhism, but only insofar as it is represented by one of the nine State-recognised monastic orders; adherents of other religions or beliefs, in particular the Rohingya Muslims, are discriminated against and persecuted.

Since 2017 the authorities forced approximately 1.2 million Rohingya Muslims to flee the country. The military coup of 1 February 2021 initiated a cycle of violence, human rights violations and abuses, and plunged the country into a deep political, economic and humanitarian crisis.

## Recommendations:

Whereas before the military coup the EU was supporting the peace process, ever since all support channelled through the government was suspended. The EU extended its restrictive measures on Myanmar and imposed two additional rounds of sanctions. Ever since, the EU adopted a 'back to basics' approach, supporting local communities, whilst working through civil society.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- The EU and its Member States should continue its policy of cancelling all support through the government of Myanmar until real progress has been made with regard to the protection of human rights in general and of the freedom of religion or belief in particular;
- At the same time, the EU and its Member States should include religious and belief organisations in their activities as part of the 'back to basics' approach. This may strengthen the position of these organisations vis-à-vis the military regime and can also reach groups in regions, where it may otherwise be difficult to find the right interlocutors for humanitarian relief.

# NIGERIA



## FoRB Situation: 8 (Severe violations)

The violations mentioned in the academic report relate:

- In Nigerian states that apply Islamic law, public authorities have brought proceedings against converts from Islam to the Christian faith. At the same time, conversion to Islam is forced upon kidnapped girls and others by Boko Haram, ISWAP and other Islamist militant organizations;
- Federal and state penal codes criminalise blasphemy and mob violence against so called blasphemy cases happen with impunity;
- In states that apply Islamic law, the building of churches is restricted or de facto prohibited; churches are demolished arbitrarily;
- Incitement to religious hatred and discrimination against the Christian (and non-religious) minority in Muslim-majority states;
- Widespread violence by state and non-state actors against civilians and religious targets.

## Recommendations:

In 2008, the EU and Nigeria agreed on a broader political framework: the EU-Nigeria Joint Way Forward, establishing the principles, guidelines and priority areas for enhanced political dialogue and cooperation. Areas of mutual interest and concern for intensified dialogue include peace and security, migration, good governance and democracy, human rights, trade and regional integration, among other topics. Through the EU-Nigeria Ministerial Roadmap many technical and senior level contacts continue to take place.

The key focus areas for EU projects and activities include FoRB. The EU Delegation has engaged with faith based actors and communities across the key priority areas of development cooperation. Furthermore, the Delegation and Member States tried to ensure a fair trial of two Nigerians accused of blasphemy.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- The EU Delegation and Member States are encouraged to continue their engagement with faith based actors and communities in the context of development cooperation and to report on their experiences, which may serve as best practice for their counterparts in other countries;



- Similarly, engagement with faith based actors and communities could usefully be extended to activities in the field of peace-building;
- In its dialogue with the Nigerian authorities, the positive and negative roles of religion or belief, beside other factors like tribalism and the effects of climate change, in the context of the wide-spread violence in the country should be highlighted and ways should be explored;
- The EU and Member States should discuss with the Nigerian authorities more effective ways of protecting vulnerable groups, such as religious and belief minorities against violence;
- In the context of the political dialogue, the release of prisoners of conscience should receive higher priority.



## FoRB Situation: 10 (Severe violations)

The violations mentioned in the academic report relate to:

- Renouncing the majority-religion Islam can be considered as blasphemy and therefore punished with the death penalty; Ahmadis risk being charged with blasphemy if they identify themselves as Muslims; Atheism is not officially recognised;
- Kidnapping, followed by forced conversion and forced marriage of young girls belonging to minority religions and beliefs, with the involvement of religious authorities and the complicity of security forces and the justice system;
- The very strict blasphemy law has been used and abused and can lead to imprisonment for life or death. This causes followers of minority religion and belief to 'walk on eggs';
- Insufficient protection of places of worship or cemeteries of religious and belief minorities against acts of vandalism;
- Identity papers carry an indication of religious affiliation, which increases the vulnerability of religious and belief minorities and is likely to lead to discrimination;
- Textbooks used in the educational system use derogatory language in respect of religious minorities.

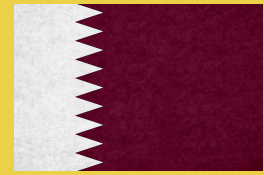
## Recommendations:

The EU relations with Pakistan are guided by the EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan, signed in June 2019, and by the 2004 Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development. Pakistan continues to be a beneficiary of the EU's preferential trade regime (GSP+). The EU Delegation and Member States address human rights through engagement at various levels with a focus on access to justice and rule of law, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, as well as labour rights.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- The EU and Member States should continue to support dialogue on civil and political rights, in particular, through the Asma Jahangir Conference, and encourage discussion of the relationship between human rights and religious and beliefs actors and communities;
- As part of the political dialogue between the EU and Member States on the one hand and Pakistan on the other, ways should be explored for the Pakistani authorities to offer better protection of religious and belief minorities, in particular to stop the kidnapping of young girls, the abuse of the blasphemy laws, and to guarantee the protection of places of worship and cemeteries against vandalism;

- In the context of educational projects and activities, the EU and Member States should give more priority to the issue of equal opportunities in education and non-discrimination of children from religious and belief minorities (in line with Art. 22 of Pakistan's Constitution) and to the removal of all discriminatory content against religious and belief communities from curricula;
- Make better use of the conditions related to the GSP+ status, when it comes to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.



## FoRB Situation: 5 (Problematic issues)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report are related to:

- The position of Muslims who convert to another religion or belief, and may face scrutiny, intimidation by law enforcement, job loss, social exclusion and loss of family rights;
- The wide interpretation of the prohibition under the Penal Code, of offending Islam or cursing of any of the divine religions, as well as of the publication of texts that incite social discord or religious strife;
- The restrictions of the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief in public for religions and beliefs other than Islam;
- Making the rights of religious communities (e.g. to worship privately or import or produce religious texts) dependent on registration, while denying e.g. Hindus, Buddhists and Bahá'ís registration.

Qatar actively supports interfaith dialogue and understanding, in particular, through the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue.

## Recommendations:

Relations of the EU and its Member States with Iraq are based on a Cooperation Arrangement between the EEAS and the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In September 2022 a new EU Delegation to the State of Qatar was opened. Also in September 2022, the 4th EU-Qatar Human Rights Dialogue was held. In May 2022, the 14th edition of the Doha International Center for Inter-faith Dialogue took place in Doha.

In their human rights dialogue with Qatar, the EU and its Member States concentrate on migrant workers' rights, labour reforms and gender issues.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- Considering the efforts made by Qatar to acquire international prominence, more attention should be paid to the rights of religious and belief minorities. In particular, the effects of registration requirements should be discussed;
- The Doha International Center for Inter-faith Dialogue should be encouraged to discuss and find solutions for issues related to religiously inspired rules on conversion, family law and freedom of expression. Also the role of religious and belief leaders in peace-building could usefully be explored more in-depth, considering the tensions in the region;
- Participants of the EU and its Member States in the Human Rights Dialogue with Qatar should show their 'religious literacy' and their awareness of the intersectionality of FoRB and other human rights.

# SOUTH AFRICA



## FoRB Situation: 0 (Minor concerns)

There are no major issues identified in the academic report with regard to the FoRB.

With the ending of Apartheid in the early 1990s, South Africa was regarded as a beacon of hope and a proponent of human rights for the entire African continent. More recently, economic and social inequalities, increase of corruption and gender-based violence, as well as the rise of antisemitic incidents, the situation in the country has deteriorated. Notwithstanding these more recent developments, South Africa stands out as a strongly democratic constitutional democracy.

## Recommendations:

The EU considers South Africa one of its ten strategic partners, and established in 2006 a formal Strategic Partnership followed by a Joint Action Plan in 2007. Moreover, bilateral agreements have been concluded on trade, development and Cooperation with South Africa and the SADC (including neighbouring countries).

In 2022, the 7th South Africa-EU Human Rights Dialogue was held in Brussels. The EU supports South Africa financially in a wide range of human rights activities, focusing, inter alia, on gender issues, combat against child labour and anti-corruption efforts.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- Considering South Africa's prominent position in Africa, and its good track record in respect of the protection and promotion of FoRB, the Human Rights Dialogues should include discussions on best practices with regard to the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief and the elimination of intolerance based on religion or belief and ways of making these relevant also for other African countries;
- South Africa has experienced itself the importance of active reconciliation efforts in the aftermath of the Apartheid regimes. Archbishop Desmond Tutu himself was a major drive behind these activities. Considering the tensions and conflicts on the African continent, the role of religious and belief leaders in bringing forward durable peace among different ethnic and religious and belief communities should be explored more frequently and extensively as part of the dialogues between the EU, its Member States and South Africa. Similarly, the role of religious and belief communities and their leaders in reducing inequalities in society should become part of the EU's projects in this area in South Africa.



## FoRB Situation: 4 (Problematic issues)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report are related to:

- Societal pressures against leaving the Muslim faith, including threats and violence;
- Wide interpretation of prohibition of incitement of hatred, the harming of public morals, or the disruption of others' lives through telecommunication means;
- enforcement of religious prescriptions, such as the observance of abstinence during the Ramadan, by the authorities;
- limitations of the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief for non-Sunni Muslims and non-Abrahamic religions.

Although Tunisia's Constitution protects the freedom of religion or belief, since its revision in 2022, institutional guarantees for their protection have been weakened. The new Constitution strongly reinforces the role of the President who now enjoys broad executive powers and clearly has the upper institutional hand over a weakened legislative branch and judiciary.

## Recommendations:

Based on the European Neighbourhood Policy, the (1995) Association Agreement, the EU and its Member States have developed strong relations with Tunisia: not only in terms of trade, but also by supporting projects aimed at addressing causes of instability, irregular migration and forced displacement. Furthering good governance, the rule of law and human rights in general. Moreover, the EU and its Member States also supported projects addressing irregular migration and forced displacement. The EU's action on human rights and democracy focused on gender equality and gender-based violence, as well as on strengthening emerging civil society organisations.

This leads to the following recommendations for strengthening the promotion of FoRB in the contacts of the EU with Tunisian authorities and civil society, as well as through support for targeted actions on the ground:

- Strengthening the religious literacy aspect in the EU's programmes aimed at gender equality and at protecting Tunisian women and girls against gender-based violence;
- Furthering humanitarian assistance to refugees, in particular those from sub-Saharan Africa, Libya and Sudan, in co-operation with religion or belief based NGOs;
- Focusing in the dialogue with the Tunisian government on the consequences of the wide interpretation of the prohibition of 'incitement to hatred, etc., through telecommunications' for the rights of religious and belief minorities;
- Initiating a free and open discussion among academic and religious scholars on potentially discriminatory practices concerning family law, and the observance in public of religious and belief prescriptions.



## ForB Situation: 5 (Problematic issues)

The problematic issues identified in the academic report relate to:

- Pressure, mainly from society, on converts from Islam. Identifying as a non-believer or atheist is especially problematic and prompts a harsh response;
- Criminalisation of blasphemy or ‘insult of religious values’ silencing minority religious and belief communities by law;
- The right to conscientious objection is not recognised;
- Discrimination against the Alevites, the largest religious minority in Turkey, in particular the refusal of recognition of Alevi places of worship;
- Lack of protection against verbal and physical violence directed towards minorities, such as Alevites, Jews and Christians.

## Recommendations:

Türkiye’s involvement with European integration dates back to 1959 and includes the Ankara Association Agreement (1963) resulting in the establishment of a customs union in 1995. Accession negotiations started in 2005, but have been suspended in 2018, due to lack of reforms in the functioning of the democratic system, respect for fundamental rights and the independence of the judiciary.

The EU and Member States have provided to Turkey, both to the authorities and to civil society organisations, significant amounts for, inter alia, the promotion of human rights, humanitarian aid and the protection of refugees.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- In the context of human rights and development related programmes, the EU and Member States should pay particular attention to the protection of religious and belief minorities, including Alevites, Jews and Christians, against discriminatory practices and societal violence;
- In the context of the EU Facility for Refugees in Türkiye, special attention should be given to refugees who were prosecuted on the basis of their religion or belief. Forceful deportation to their country of origin should stop;
- As part of the political dialogue with the Turkish government, special attention should be given to the right to conscientious objection, the protection of religious and belief minorities against violence and discrimination, and the negative effects of criminalisation of (a broad interpretation of) blasphemy.





## ForB Situation: 8 (Severe violations)

The violations identified in the academic report relate to:

- In spite of the law pressuring members of especially minority and unregistered religious groups to join recognised religious groups. Refusal to do so may lead to confiscation of goods and the denial of identity documents;
- Government censorship of publications. Religious practitioners criticising the government may face arrest and detention;
- Government authorities arbitrarily place restrictions on religious and belief activities, including religious celebrations, and engage in seizing of land, arbitrary arrests of religious leaders and their incommunicado detention without charges;
- Certain religious groups, such as the Duong Van Minh, are banned by the authorities and their religious objects are destroyed;
- Lack of protection of members of religious communities against violence and incitement thereof both by government and non-State actors, besides the widespread use of torture and bad treatment of detained persons.

## Recommendations:

Vietnam is one of EU's main partners in the region, with the highest number of agreements of any country in South East Asia, including a partnership and cooperation agreement, like a free trade agreement, and a forest law enforcement, governance and trade voluntary partnership agreement (FLEGT).

The EU and Member States have developed a wide range of activities on human rights, including the protection of freedom of religion or belief, and maintained regular exchanges on human rights with Vietnam.

This leads to the following recommendations:

- The EU and Member States should give more priority in their talks with the Vietnamese authorities to respect for freedom of religion or belief, especially the protection of unregistered religious and belief minorities;
- Special attention should be paid to the scope of the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief alone or in community with others, and the negative effects of current restrictions, such as censorship and arbitrary restrictions on religious and belief activities.

# ANNEXES

## Annex I

Academic analysis of the FoRB situation of 41 countries

## Annex II

Materials collected by the European Parliament Research Service on:

- EU Relations with selected non-European countries with regards to FoRB
- FoRB - EU Institutions



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