
The UK Must Learn to Lead on Religious Freedom

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Whilst global religious freedom is known in general to be declining, there are at least reasons to be optimistic about the UK's engagement on the subject. The UK Government has committed to implementing all of the 22 recommendations from the Bishop of Truro's [report](#) on FCDO (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) support for persecuted Christians. These recommendations have not been fully and meaningfully implemented, but there is at least the commitment to do so. Importantly, a formal review of the implementation is coming soon.

The Bishop has gone on to chair the UK Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Forum. The FoRB Forum has been established over the past year as a roundtable for civil society organisations (CSOs) to communicate on particular religious freedom concerns with each other, and the government representatives in attendance. It is a space that facilitates better collaboration amongst these CSOs.

The appointment of a Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB represents one of the great forward strides of the past five years. Not only is that an encouragement in itself, but the office is presently held by Fiona Bruce, the MP for Congleton, who is both enthusiastic and highly capable. Mrs. Bruce has a clear vision for what she will be seeking to achieve as Special Envoy and a team with the expertise to ensure she hits her ambitious marks.

The UK has also committed to hosting the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in 2022. This has been a massive event in the international diplomatic calendar since 2018. It was initially hosted by the US State Department in Washington DC and was one of the largest events of its kind ever hosted there. After a few years in DC, Poland then hosted it virtually last year. It is attended by a long list of government ministers from both FoRB defending and FoRB violating countries along with the global plethora of CSOs, as well as survivors of religious freedom violations. Previous speakers at the Ministerial included former Vice President Mike Pence, then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, as well as the likes of Tony Blair and survivors of religious persecution such as Nobel Laureate Nadia Murad and Rohingya Muslim activist Wai Wai Nu. It is an important platform for ideas, commitments, and positive statements, as well as discreet diplomacy. That the UK has taken it on is exciting.

If you would have told me ten years ago that these developments were in the pipeline, I would have been surprised and delighted. We did spot an opportunity for progress under Theresa May's premiership and with the Democratic Unionist Party holding the balance of power, and gains were achieved during that time. Whilst there were one or two extremely astute and proactive civil servants working behind the scenes, the change can in part, be attributed to Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon. Lord Ahmad is the hardworking, knowledgeable, and dedicated FCDO Minister of State whose responsibilities include Human Rights. He was the first Special Envoy for FoRB when Theresa May created the position in 2018.

The question then at this point cannot be “Haven’t we done well?” but instead it must be “Where do we go from here?”

The UK is well-positioned to be a global leader alongside the United States in understanding, defending, and promoting religious freedom. There are many countries in which we could leverage our influence to dislodge broken policies and attitudes, and empower the flourishing of those nations and their citizens. However, notwithstanding all the above, there is a threat to this potential, which was betrayed somewhat by the content and handling of the annual FCDO Human Rights and Democracy [Report](#). In July, the report was published without a media release, although they need not have worried about offending perpetrating regimes. It is bland and vague with great quantities of significant detail lacking in the FoRB sections.

For example, in the section on Egypt, the report appropriately mentions Ramy Kamel, the imprisoned Coptic human rights defender. However, it fails to reference the ‘reconciliation councils’ imposed on the victims of mob violence, which make a mockery of justice. The report also omits the continued presence of Article 98(f) of the penal code (Egypt’s blasphemy law), which casts a chilling, menacing shadow over Egypt’s faith communities. The reporting gaps do not end there. One finds no mention of the ongoing problems around the presence of a person’s religion on their identity documents which works to the great detriment of minority communities and religious converts.

The section on Algeria is risible and could have been written by Algeria’s diplomats on behalf of the FCDO. Certainly they must have been parroted unquestioningly from Algerian governmental sources. For example, the opening suggestion that “Provisions for FoRB were maintained in the new constitution” is completely untrue. Human Rights Watch made a very different [appraisal](#), stating that governments may often ignore the human rights provisions in their constitutions, but it is more unusual “when a government decides to drop all pretence at respecting a right by expunging it from its constitution. Algerian authorities seem to have done just that by airbrushing the right to freedom of belief, a fixture of every constitution since Algeria gained its independence in 1962, from the one adopted last November.” So, given that the section on Algeria is three sentences in length, it’s disappointing that at least a third of it is false.

The final of these three sentences notes that the UK Ambassador had discussions with Algerian government ministers, which is encouraging. However, the report states that the meetings explored “our concern that some religious groups in Algeria, including Ahmadi minorities and Christians, had reported difficulties in practising their faith.” This choice of words regarding the gravity of the plight of Ahmadis and Christians must be quintessentially British comic understatement. If such difficulties in practicing their faith include the trial and imprisonment of more than ten percent of Algerian Ahmadis on account of their religious identity then they are certainly encountering such difficulties. The Algerian Government has also been pursuing a policy for many years involving the incremental closure and sealing of all Protestant churches. This accelerated when Covid-19 gave the authorities an excuse to close all public buildings at once, subsequently permitting the reopening of all but the churches. I guess in such circumstances, amongst other violations, the Protestant Christian community has encountered some such difficulties as well. It goes without saying that the language is mealymouthed and insulting, in spite of extensive briefings to the FCDO on these subjects.

The FCDO report and its handling exposes quite articulately the problem from some quarters within the department. With a small handful of exceptions, the UK’s diplomatic elites tend to be

handicapped by religious illiteracy. When combined with the contempt for religion and the religious, which is popular amongst their cadre, this inevitably leads to treating religious freedom policy as largely an inconvenience rather than a fundamental human right and primary policy concern.

We watch with horror and utter dismay as the Taliban tear through Afghanistan, undoing in moments 20 years of diplomatic, financial, educational, and military investment. Investment is too callous a term when considering the human cost of this nation-building effort – the long, long list of young servicemen and women who were killed in that field of conflict. In Iran, earlier this month [Ebrahim Raisi](#), a murderous human rights abuser, who made religious minorities a prime target whilst Chief of the Judiciary, was inaugurated as President of the Islamic Republic. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will seek to capitalise on both of these developments, creating Islamist alliances in hostile alignment against the West. Meanwhile, Lebanon, a comparative haven of religio-social harmony in the Middle East – note heavy emphasis on comparative – and host to vast quantities of refugees, continues to descend towards political and economic catastrophe.

This is the context in which we need diplomats who are literate in religion. We need policy to be shaped by those who understand the centrality of religious identity in geopolitical dynamics throughout most of the rest of the world. Our civil servants should be trained to connect the dots between religious pluralism, international security, and regional economic stability. And they must be shown the value of defending and promoting foundational human rights, including religious freedom, regardless of their own beliefs, because doing so is right and good for humanity and their country's own strategic objectives. If we want them to perform effectively, we need comprehensive training in religion and religious freedom for our diplomats.

Further, the Government and its senior civil servants should lean into the religion-palooza that is the UK Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. I can well imagine that it is the kind of summit that fills many in Whitehall with dread, but they must not be tempted to downplay it or contort the event to make it a platform for more fashionable human rights. Whilst the left-wing press at home might beat up the Government slightly less, such manoeuvres will play very badly before the various international audiences. We must embrace and celebrate the event with all its potential discomfort. It must be resourced properly, the Special Envoy must lead in its shaping, and experts must be engaged to strategise human rights victories that could flow from it. This is an area of bipartisan international policy on which the UK can lead as a champion of freedom.

It is not just the Government that needs to ask the question of how to progress and achieve more. If CSOs and activists expect government action, we must improve the way we operate. Photos with even more MPs in front of your banner does not constitute an achievement. Another devastating report published is as likely to drive change as the last devastating report. Political engagement and research publication are entirely legitimate activities if they are part of broader strategies geared towards real change. Another key area for improvement relates to information. CSOs need to be thinking dynamically about how to enhance the quantity and quality of data, because already reluctant government officials have a reasonable excuse if the information they are presented with is incomplete and unreliable.

The religious freedom space encompasses some phenomenal talent and experience, and there are some amazing opportunities to win real victories for the oppressed. However, we need to set even more ambitious targets. We need to identify new and effective strategies together. And we need to

renew our resolve. If we are going to stand a chance against the latest generation of tyranny, the UK can and must lead the way on religious freedom.

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