
For everyone, everywhere: Essential ‘next steps’ to summits and ministerials to advance religious freedom for all

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The 2022 International Religious Freedom Summit, hosted in Washington, D.C., and the 2022 Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief, hosted by the United Kingdom presented an important opportunity for governments, religious leaders, survivors of persecution, advocates, and civil society organizations from around the world to grapple with religious freedom challenges and opportunities globally

But more critical than the act of convening is the impact this engagement has on the practical experience of the people for whom this right is at risk.

How can we safeguard against perfunctory “progress” in advancing religious freedom and build a culture of strategic development to secure this right for all — both in diplomatic engagement as well as efforts within a government's own borders?

Success to this end depends largely on lessons learned from these meetings and how they are applied to challenges on the ground in the days, weeks and months that follow. Three ‘next steps’, in particular — **robust engagement, strategic planning, and objective evaluation** — can mitigate mere *symbolic* progress and foster sustainable advances in securing this essential right for everyone, everywhere.

Step 1: Engage diverse stakeholders in discussions, policy development processes, and implementation.

Foundational to any effort to advance religious freedom is ensuring that every religious community has a seat at the table. Efforts to advance this right should engage diverse stakeholders to assess the specific challenges they face exercising religious freedom in full. Diversity in this respect is not exclusive to religious association; rather, it should be inclusive of diverse ethnic groups as well as women, displaced persons, and refugees who are all subject to the laws, policies, and social practices affecting this right.

This ensures discussions, policy development processes, and ultimately the implementation of any policy or initiative reflects the interests and intentions of all affected groups. It also increases the odds that communities within a society will value and support efforts to promote this right broadly across society.

In many parts of the world, religious minorities and groups vulnerable to discrimination or marginalization have created coalitions to advance religious freedom in their respective countries. By collaborating together across religious and ethnic divides to advance their shared rights, they engage the government and advocate for practical improvements in religious freedom more effectively than any single organization or religious group would likely do alone.

Members of the religious majority also have a critical role in advancing religious freedom in any context. To this end, leadership and influential stakeholders within a majority can promote broader support for religious freedom, respond to the challenges or concerns a majority community may have about religious freedom-oriented policies or initiatives, and ultimately mitigate discrimination or marginalization on the basis of their religion.

Step 2: Develop a strategic plan to advance religious freedom with measurable benchmarks to assess progress.

Among participants of high-level meetings to discuss religious freedom globally, there is a general consensus that this right is often elusive to the majority of the world's population, as legal challenges and social hostilities on the basis of religion have increased worldwide. It's also accepted that religious freedom is integral to stable, secure, and flourishing societies. Much discussion is focused on the development of policy recommendations and priorities to advance religious freedom in areas where this right is most at risk.

But how are these policies and priorities implemented in practice? What's the path from marginalization to liberation for those who suffer under the discriminatory laws, policies and practices that foment discrimination and violence? Identifying the priority or policy change needed to advance religious freedom is an important first step, but it is only the first step. What follows — the strategy to fully realize this right — is critically important.

To this end, government and community actors can develop a strategic plan that takes into consideration: the challenges and drivers of discrimination and violence; realistic expectations for what “success” looks like and how long it will take; who will play a critical role in its success; and measurable benchmarks or “steps” that chart the course to success.

Summits and Ministerials also present a valuable opportunity to showcase *what* has advanced religious freedom and *how* those advocates—especially those at the “grassroots” or local level—

have strategically engaged their governments and communities to expand this right. These discussions need not only focus on hallmark successes; in fact, open discourse about challenges faced cultivates a space in which participants can learn from and collaborate on best practices that can apply to common priorities in diverse contexts.

Moreover, declarations and charters promoting or enshrining religious freedom often serve as consensus builders among those who actively support these rights and protections at high-level meetings. Unsurprisingly, leaders or actors who incite or provoke the very violations that declarations and charters condemn are conspicuously absent from both the drafting process and the list of signatories. To this end, particular consideration should be given to how the rights and values enshrined in these documents will be practically applied to communities as well as how leaders can mitigate hostilities toward efforts to advance religious freedom.

Step 3: Conduct objective assessments of religious freedom conditions to safeguard against symbolic progress advancing this right.

Regular and objective evaluation of efforts is integral to on-the-ground progress for religious freedom. This is particularly important in bilateral diplomatic initiatives that address violations of this right, as recent U.S. engagement on religious freedom with Nigeria illustrates.

The U.S. Department of State [designated](#) Nigeria as a “country of particular concern” in response to the Nigerian government’s engagement in or toleration of “systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom” in 2020. Just one year later, the State Department removed the CPC designation from Nigeria — a move that only ought to take place after the U.S. government observes demonstrable improvements in religious freedom conditions in the country.

What improvements justified the designation removal? The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) — the body established by the U.S. government to monitor religious freedom conditions globally and provide policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State and Congress — [condemned](#) the decision.

Both USCIRF and State Department reports on religious freedom in Nigeria described ongoing egregious attacks against civilians on the basis of their religion. And these attacks have continued. In May 2022, [Deborah Samuel](#), a college student in Sokoto State, was accused of blasphemy and subsequently lynched and burned by an angry mob. This egregious attack is indicative of a trend of mob violence largely carried out with impunity.

The example of Nigeria illustrates how objective assessments of religious freedom conditions against the benchmarks laid out in a strategic plan can mitigate the risk of stopping short or abandoning these efforts, especially at those moments most critical to their success.

There is also a risk of conflating a nation’s “coexistence” or “tolerance” efforts in service of geopolitical interests with improvements in religious freedom conditions among its citizens — even when those efforts explicitly endorse “religious freedom.” The Abraham Accords, for example, have been praised as significant progress towards greater respect for religious diversity and inclusion across the MENA region. The signatories — Bahrain, Israel, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates — [recognized](#) “the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace in the Middle East and around the world based on mutual understanding and coexistence, as well as respect for human dignity and freedom, including religious freedom.”

But, in effect, such political agreements bear little influence on those within these countries who are marginalized on the basis of their religion, religious beliefs, or sectarian affiliation. (It also mischaracterizes regional challenges to the statehood of Israel with anti-semitism or discrimination on the basis of the religion).

An assessment of religious freedom in these countries — or any other, for that matter — must carefully consider how observed and documented challenges to this fundamental right *within its borders* are addressed specifically and practically.

Until Religious Freedom is for Everyone, Everywhere

Summits and ministerials present tremendous opportunity and responsibility. They provide an essential space in which government officials, religious leaders, and community members can be in solidarity with the people most grievously affected by laws, policies and practices that restrict religious freedom. They’re also the basis for deliberate and effective engagement to safeguard religious freedom in countries where this right is most at risk.

Now, the success of these convenings will be seen most evidently in efforts to advance religious freedom — for everyone, everywhere — in the days ahead.

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