

United States Senate

February 18, 2016

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Thank you for vocalizing support for religious freedom and religious minorities both here in the United States and around the world. On September 23, 2015, after hosting Pope Francis at the White House, you advanced a series of values and objectives including: "Promoting and protecting religious freedom is a key objective of U.S. foreign policy. In recognition of the increasingly important role that religion is playing in international affairs, and of the core importance of freedom of religion and conscience as a universal human right...The United States will continue to stand for the universal right of all people to practice their faiths in peace and in freedom." It is imperative that the U.S. use every appropriate venue to support this vital human right, listed first among our own Bill of Rights. I appreciate the ongoing efforts of this Administration to defend the right of every human being to think, believe, and act according to their conscience.

As Pope Francis stated in his recent address to a joint session of Congress, "It is important that today, as in the past, the voice of faith continue to be heard, for it is a voice of fraternity and love, which tries to bring out the best in each person and in each society." Freedom of religion is a fundamental human value that transcends physical and ideological borders. In light of its essential nature, I am concerned with the United States' increasingly close relations with nations that have not protected the religious liberty and human rights of their people.

Particularly, I am concerned with Cuba and India. Cuba has a long history of human rights and religious liberty violations. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has placed Cuba on its Tier 2 list (which consists of countries that require close monitoring due to violations of religious freedom) since 2004. The Cuban Communist Party has authority to regulate religious institutions through the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA). In order to be officially recognized, religious groups must apply to the Ministry of Justice, with the ORA giving final approval. Some groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, have been waiting for decades for their application to be processed.

Although large established churches, such as the Catholic Church and certain Protestant denominations, that support government policies, are granted "pockets" of permitted freedoms, the government continues to routinely harass smaller, more independent churches. The Apostolic Reformation is an independent religious organization that has been continually harassed through the arrest of leaders, destruction of property, and government-organized mob attacks. In 2015, Cuban

authorities cracked down on non-registered Protestant house churches, threatening to confiscate or destroy their properties. 2,000 Assemblies of God churches were declared illegal and remain vulnerable to more government action. Members of the Eastern and Western Baptist Conventions reported that they were surveilled and harassed, with some receiving death threats. Other independent Protestant churches also reported harassment and fines, with a national television program even describing evangelical churches as “subversive organizations.”

Additionally, the government habitually prevents human rights and democracy activists, including the Catholic group, Ladies in White, from realizing their constitutional rights to the freedom of religion or belief by detaining them and preventing them from attending church services and pressuring pastors to expel them from their churches. In September 2015, more than 100 such activists were detained during Pope Francis’s mission to the island nation.

Despite these continued violations of religious liberty and human rights, the United States has increasingly expanded relations with Cuba. This “normalization” has included not only reestablishing a U.S. Embassy in Havana, but also removing Cuba from the State Sponsor of Terrorism list. Additionally, travel and export restrictions have been loosened and economic activity has been made significantly easier.

I am concerned by Cuba’s lack of attention to protecting religious liberty and human rights. As such, I request that the Administration reconsider any further steps to normalize relations with Cuba or financially benefit their oppressive government. Since relations have already significantly changed, I encourage the Administration to use this new relationship to encourage the Cuban government to respect the religious liberty and human rights of their citizens.

India has a very different cultural and governmental structure from Cuba, but USCIRF for years has placed this nation on its Tier 2. Although it has a religiously diverse society and a secular government, there are significant violations of human rights and freedom of religion. The campaigning prior to the country’s 2014 general election was religiously-divisive and increased religious tensions. For three consecutive years, religiously motivated and communal violence has increased. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is in power, has been linked to violent attacks and forced conversions undertaken by Hindu nationalist groups. Although Prime Minister Modi has recently stated his commitment to freedom of religion, he continues to be the only person who has ever had a visa revoked by the State Department for being “responsible for or directly carr(ying) out...particularly severe violations of religious freedom.”

Even though there are some laws in place to protect religious minorities, these laws are often unfairly enforced or never enforced at all. Six of India’s 28 states have enacted Freedom of Religion Acts which commonly are referred to as anti-conversion laws. Although the laws intend to protect religious minorities from forced, fraudulent, or induced conversions, they are only enforced with regard to conversions away from Hinduism. Furthermore, accusations of violating provisions of the Freedom of Religion Acts do not require evidence. These laws have created a hostile and violent environment for members of religious minority communities. The six Indian states with these laws reportedly have the greatest number of religiously-motivated attacks and incidents of communal violence.

Christians and Muslims are often the target of religious harassment and violence. Christians have reported violence, arson, destruction of property, and a reluctance of local police to protect them or

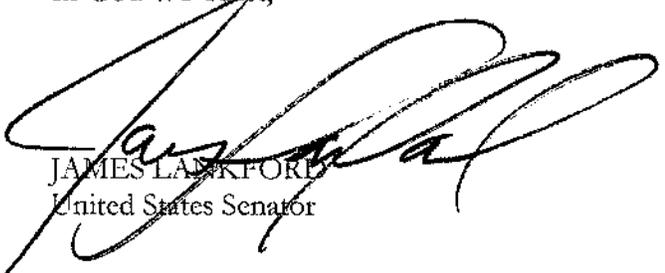
investigate the incidents. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of India, in November and December of 2014 there were more than 38 incidents of harassment or violence against Christians. Additionally, there have been violent attacks on Catholic churches and communities. Muslims have been particularly targeted by Hindu nationalists and politicians who have perpetuated hate campaigns against them, which has resulted in discrimination, harassment, and severe violence – including an attack in January of 2015 of a majority-Muslim village by a 5,000 person mob after a Hindu man had been killed. During the incident, several people were burned alive and 25 houses were set on fire.

The United States has had a close relationship with India for decades, however, your Administration has advanced an even closer alliance. This has included two state visits to India, more than any other President. Additionally, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton started the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue. Although five dialogues have been held since 2009, none have addressed India's significant religious liberty issues.

The United States should consider its role and relations with India with caution. While India continues to suppress religious liberty and human rights, I encourage the Administration to utilize the strength of our current relationship with India to support the religious liberty and human rights of Indian citizens of all faiths.

Religious liberty is a basic human right and one that is denied to many people across the world. In your words, "people are only truly free when they can practice their faith freely." I respectfully request that the Administration reconsider increasing relations with nations that do not respect this fundamental right.

In God We Trust,



JAMES LANKFORD
United States Senator