

CONFERENCE REPORT
ICLRS: ADVANCING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN DIFFERENT POLITICAL REGIMES
JUNE 7, 2021

Introduction:

The ICLRS webinar discussed issues and methods for advancing religious freedoms internationally, pulling examples from Myanmar and Turkey. This report provides a brief summary of the discussion organized by panelist presentation. Responses to the question and answer section are also included in the report.

Brett G. Scharffs

Scharffs briefly spoke about the effectiveness of sustained engagement in advancing religious freedom. He emphasized the importance of religious freedom and human dignity in various institutional complexes and how there is a need for recognition of such concepts in different circumstances. These efforts need to be consistent and ongoing. He also explained that religious freedom programs worldwide seek to connect people despite their religious differences.

Seng Mai Aung

Seng Mai Aung discussed the ICLRS religious freedom training program in Myanmar. A reconciliation and peacebuilding initiative was launched to help community members address religious freedom issues because of exacerbating international religious disputes between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State. The priority of the initiative is to identify essential constituents and respond to local issues and interests. The most practical approach uses persistent attention to local interests to show continued involvement between the local leaders and ICLRS as trust with local leaders is key to the training program's success. The program emphasizes political interest and aims to bring individuals of different religious groups closer through open and constructive dialogue. This initiative is a big step for Myanmar who previously treated religious freedom as a study separate from secular concerns.

Jan Figel

Figel's presentation examined the betterment of a growing global religious freedom movement that sparked during the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that religious freedom is a measure, principal, and instrument to peace; and that this peace will bring about justice. Figel shared that religious freedom is the deepest expression of human dignity and personal freedom, making it vital for a just society and critical to all people's rights. He pointed out that there is a more just and human way through the ICLRS's work to approach issues of religious freedom and human dignity throughout the world. One example was the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998 in the United States.

In closing remarks to his presentation, Figel focused on the actions of religious freedom and the reciprocity of ethics. The concepts of ethics and recognition of dignity work together because they are both "deeply human", referring to their relationship to innate rights that humans have. Overall, action and education are needed in the emerging global religious freedom movement. That push for religious freedom will promote ethical and cultural dignities and will become a legal and dignifying way of being a global citizen.

Mine Yildirim

Mine Yildirim is a human rights defender based in Turkey who runs the Freedom of Belief Initiative. An important part of the initiative is advocating human rights and using compliance to implement religious freedom in Turkey and internationally. Yildirim stated that the human rights approach and constructive discussion on religious freedom are paradigms for a nation to recognize violations against such concepts. In turn, nations can be examples to others and initiate treaties as a compliance-control mechanism which can promote the freedom of religion locally. Through this approach, nations and regions are prompted to join the Freedom of Belief initiative through compliance rather than force by inspiring the nations through example and practice. The compliance approach can also connect the nations to a larger framework and network of countries with the same goals of promoting religious freedom and human dignity.

Yildirim also emphasized the importance of trust building and long-term engagement, arguing that religious freedom is a sensitive topic that requires a principled and organized approach. A start of such an approach can be as simple as nations creating genuine relationships with local authorities and seeking their expertise on religious liberty issues they experience or witness.

Knox Thames

Thames is a senior fellow at the Institute for Global Engagement. He discussed his envoy experience working for the U.S. State Department where he frequently visited Iraq to find solutions to the diminishing religious minority populations. In Thames' work with the State Department, he addressed two major issues: the lack of security for minorities and ISIS's destruction of cultural heritage. The lack of security refers to Iraqi Christians and other religious minorities being attacked and driven out of Iraq by terrorist and militia groups. Thames' solution was to have minorities play an active role in their own security. In response to ISIS's destruction of the cultural heritage of Muslims and Christians, Thames helped send cultural heritage experts from the Smithsonian Institution to Iraq to teach religious minorities about the protection of their heritage.

While these solutions are small steps in addressing the challenges of religious minorities in Iraq, it is important to recognize that time and continuous effort play a key role in the resolution of such issues. Thames concluded by saying the religious freedom issues in Iraq are a challenge of perseverance, and both the international community and religious groups need to stick to the vision that people of different backgrounds and faiths can exist together.

Elizabeth Clark

Elizabeth Clark is an associate director for the ICLRS. She presented on her assessment and promotion of compliance with international norms of religious freedom and belief. There are two theories regarding state compliance with international norms. The first theory has three approaches to influencing human rights compliance. There is the rational choice model where economic incentives encourage change. The constructivist model uses repeated interactions, discussion, and exposure to norms to build trust and bring the "best practices" in law to fruition. The last approach is a sociological and psychological approach called acculturation that uses cognitive and social pressures to conform to international norms.

The second theory is called the spiral model. It describes how regimes move from a state of repression to rule consistency behavior by examining domestic and international players and the influences that socialization and changes in norms play out within a country. There are five steps to this spiral starting with repression and denial, which increases repression; at which point, the government recognizes the repression and then accepts the reputational consequences. After which, the government makes tactical concessions that lead to the prescriptive status of human rights norms being accepted which generates consistent behavior.

Responses to Question & Answer Section:

What does not work

During the panel discussion, the speakers highlighted methods that will not work when advocating for religious freedom within a nation. One example is when there are incorrect facts about a nation's religious freedom norms and policies, credibility is lost; therefore, it is important to have the correct information and relate this to each country's circumstances. Additionally, it is important to be cautious using the word 'persecution'. While there are some extreme versions, persecution is not the best word to describe all limits on religious freedom. It is also important to focus on advocating for all religious groups and to avoid long-term advocacy for one group. Although certain groups might be more oppressed at a time, it is necessary that we advocate religious freedom for every group. When sharing the importance of religious freedom internationally, there will be better communication when ideas are proposed rather than imposed. States would rather be recommended plans than told what to do.. When advocating for religious freedom, the greatest success will be achieved by being aware of and avoiding methods that do not work.

How to deal with the "Westernization problem"

There is concern that the concept of religious freedom and human rights is strictly a Western concept pushed onto other countries to get them to conform to these values. Through the seminar, the speakers highlighted that the goal is not to push Western ideas onto people but to encourage nations to look to international norms for human dignity. For instance, it is important to recognize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is a product of persons from all over the world. This can be accomplished by increasing literacy in human rights. By looking at the drafting history for the Universal Declaration, it is clear that it is not a western product. To encourage a perspective that focuses on the universal application of these concepts, it is necessary to take time to understand the approaches locally and communicate with the people within the regime to see their concerns and to see how human dignity and religious freedom concerns match up with their own.

Treat others how you want to be treated

A theme of the discussion surrounded treating other nations how you would want your own nation treated. In promoting security, having more stable governments, and improving religious freedoms, respectful treatment will come through knowing local citizens and leaders. It will work with patience, credibility, and deeds. Advocating for all groups and avoiding isolation is an important part of considerate treatment. As Mine Yildirim pointed out, this will happen when we pay close attention to our

own local groups. Looking to our own local groups can help us to work however within our space, and within our own expertise. Better success in advocating will come from focusing on areas that we have knowledge in so we can make an impact.

When working with other nations to advocate for religious freedom and human dignity, achieving a balance of understanding when there is a disconnect with local authorities is an important part of the process. This disconnect often comes about through intergovernmental channels, such as government organizations and resources. However, it is important to know the local institutional context, and how local leaders are handling it. Understanding the local norms can help religious freedom advocates know where their help is needed. In the end, this balance will enable both authorities and the public to come to a point where perspectives and expectations may be shared and communicated fairly and peacefully.

Reflections:

Taylor Nikolaus

From the webinar, there were two main points that stood out to me, and I believe are important to try to implement in our understanding of these topics.

Figel touched on how religious freedom is important to societies and individuals whether they are religious or not. This was a concept that I honestly had not thought of. I have been focusing a lot of my research on how it affects religious people and society as a whole, but I have not focused on the effects that it has on non-religious people. Religious freedom also protects people who do not wish to believe or practice any religion. The freedom to not believe anything and not have to practice under a government-enforced religion is another benefit under the freedom of religion. This shows how it applies to everyone and is a right that should be important to all. Based on this idea, we were able to add this into our definitions and implications of religious freedom.

Coming from a Western perspective, I do not often notice that the different perspectives can see concepts like this as imposing Western ideas onto other nations. I think that Elizabeth Clarke did a good job at explaining that it is not just a Western concept, but a universal one. Human rights issues, and specifically religious freedom, apply to all humans everywhere. However, we can take approaches that will help eliminate some of these mindsets that involve taking the time to really understand the areas and cultures that these rights need to be improved in. Then we can work on helping the local leaders in a way that will be long-lasting and impactful. Ultimately, perspective is important; however, allowing human dignity and religious freedom to exist in society is something that every individual should have access to. I think it is important to think of other perspectives and cultures when working on this initiative, but also important to remind ourselves that the goal is to make these concepts widely known for the betterment of the world.

Hannah Harding

One topic that was brought up was how to include the voices of women in matters of religious freedom when many religious leaders are men. Elizabeth Clark gave an answer that I thought was amazing, and that applies to issues outside of religious freedom (and even outside including voices of women). She said that even if all of the officials, recognized, or titled leaders are men, there are always

women (or just other people) who are in positions of influence. Including their voices is extremely valuable to finding solutions, because they have different perspectives than those offered by people in formal leadership positions. Also, they often have opportunities to influence in ways that won't be possible elsewhere.

Another idea that stood out to me in the forum was that an increase in religious freedom hurts nobody. Religious freedom isn't about increasing the power of a particular religious organization, or even religious organizations in general. Instead, it's about the freedom to believe for everyone. It protects both people who belong to specific faiths and those who don't. It helps prevent infringements on other basic human rights and checks the power of governments over private matters.

Thomas Nebeker

I had a few takeaways from this webinar, but I will definitely be rewatching it again now that the recording came out! (At a general conference in Hawaii, the first 5 am session is a bit drowsy, and then the real spirit hits in the personal study later!) However, the first speaker that really connected to me was Jan Figel. His ideologies were pretty simple concepts yet quite provoking to the human rights desire. He mentioned two things that seemed to speak out to me.

The first idea was that religious freedom protects all forms of belief and ideology, even those to which maintain a lifestyle of non-believing. I know this concept, but when he spoke about it, a light kind of went off, that we have a right as well to protect all beliefs. Even if it is contradictory to our own.

The second idea that he shared was later on in the Q&A section when he said that to help religious freedom and human dignity awareness grow, we cannot continue in this idea of imposed ideas. When we impose through a government the idea of protection of rights it doesn't have a deep impression or effectiveness. We have to "educate and propose". This kinda struck a chord with me that we have to fulfill this purpose in the initiative. To educate the new and existing students on campus, and propose a better understanding for them, and no amount of conflict will really change anyone's mind about these topics.

Angela Morales

_____ One of the highlights that I learned from this conference was the value of building trust. Regimes progress from being repressive to a more inclusive and consistent system if the local leaders and the interest groups trust the people in the program committee. Repeat engagement and consistent follow-up are also very helpful to ensure active involvement from all parties. However, it is crucial to recognize the progress of each country's trajectory. In this way, the efforts to advance religious freedom and human rights are more realistic and not overwhelming. When we recognize how countries manage and support the initiative, the international community will be better at addressing their concerns and needs.

Furthermore, Jan Figel's address reminded me that although democratic systems are helpful in advancing religious freedom, it is an overriding concern to be vigilant of the tyranny of the majority. Oftentimes, it can be challenging to implement human rights and religious freedom because it can be applied on an individual and collectivistic level. Democratic systems can have the potential of supporting anti-religious freedom and human rights movements. It is essential to remain attentive to the

implications of the harms that the majority can achieve. Political regimes should respect all rights to establish a just and tolerant society.

Sara Sharp

The webinar was well worth the committee's time. It helped the committee understand the challenges and approaches of advocating for religious freedom from Myanmar to Turkey. A common point presented was that open discussion about religious freedom opens opportunities for constructive dialogue, understanding, respect, and even friendships among groups of different religions. The most important thing that stood out to me in this conference is the notion that religious freedom and human rights are not Western concepts used to control other nations. They are "international norms" recognized because all human beings hold intrinsic value simply because they are human. While human rights can be used to push a Western agenda, we can recognize and correct that in ourselves and point it out in others.

Oliva Damanu

This webinar was one of my favorites. Elizabeth A. Clark who is an Associate Director in the ICLRS so eloquently discussed at the webinar about theories influencing regimes to be more compliant with their international and domestic human rights commitments and focus more on the process of regime change. I believe that the theories stated above look at human how rights might integrate into international norms. Promoting freedom of religion or belief, like other human rights norms, requires patient persistence and an understanding of how religious freedom rights intersect with the other concerns a nation may be facing. Sustained change often requires continuous engagement and broader cultural shifts.