

Legislators lead the way to freedom of religion and belief

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In late June 2014, a meeting of legislators from around the globe took place on the fringes of the Oxford Journal of Law and Religion Conference. Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose, in her capacity as chair of the British All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief (APPG), extended an invitation to a number of parliamentarians who had previously been active in defending the right to freedom of religion and belief (FoRB). This group discussed the deteriorating international climate for FoRB and brainstormed about how they might best support these fundamental rights.

The participants decided to initiate a network of like-minded parliamentarians from around the world, with the purpose of sharing information, coordinating activity and initiating joint responses on issues of religious freedom. The network would cross political and religious lines and would be focussed narrowly on FoRB issues. The goal of this new proposed network was to promote freedom of religion or belief as a human right, including the right to believe as one chooses, to change one's beliefs, and to live out those beliefs.

The language adopted was similar to that found in Article 18 of both the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which asserts that everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and that this right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice and to manifest, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, that religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

Legislators were to be the primary focus of the new network. Although other groups, such as the APPG, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), and the EU Parliament's Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief had been doing exceptional work, there was no entity designed specifically to encourage legislators to work cooperatively and internationally on this issue.

The meeting ended with an invitation from Norwegian MP Abid Raja to meet again in fall 2014 in Oslo.

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On 8 November 2014, the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) was launched at the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo. In the intervening months, a charter was written, a 'Steering Group' leadership structure was put in place, and a strategy was formulated. The Oslo Charter (see Appendix) is the founding declaration of IPPFoRB. It is an expression of common goals and a declaration of commitment to FoRB for everyone, everywhere. Over 30 parliamentarians from around the globe came to Oslo to witness the unveiling of the Charter and to sign on to it. Norwegian political parties expressed their support for the Charter's principles and the network was born.

The early strategy was simply to welcome and provide an informal resource for all legislators who had an interest in FoRB issues. Work was guided by the volunteer Steering Group and carried out by a volunteer Secretariat, consisting of interested support staff. The intent was never to put a centralized 'command and control' bureaucracy in place but rather to assist local parliamentarians in establishing networks in their own nations or regions and then to connect them to the expertise of other legislators to assist and strengthen them. One early initiative offered 'advocacy' letters to be signed by interested network participants, addressing urgent issues of religious persecution in Myanmar and Pakistan.

One of the results of the Oslo launch was the initiation of new partnerships. The International Contact Working Group, USCIRE, the Norwegian government, the Church of England and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF) from Germany all indicated a desire to work with IPPFoRB. A proposal was made to host a joint conference of parliamentarians in New York. Planning throughout 2015 resulted in an unprecedented gathering of nearly 100 parliamentarians from 45 countries in New York City in November 2015.

This First International Parliamentarians Conference, titled "Multinational Efforts to Promote Freedom of Religion or Belief," focussed on finding concrete actions that could create an atmosphere of change. Participants were encouraged to sign the following items:

- the New York Resolution on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which committed signatories to take action to promote religious freedom;
- one or more of three advocacy letters, highlighting the growing threat of religious persecution in Myanmar, Iran and Vietnam, respectively; and
- a letter calling for the release of American pastor Saeed Abedini, who had been jailed in Iran since 2012. Sixty-seven Parliamentarians signed the letter after hearing directly from Aedine Naghmeah Abedini, pastor Abedini's wife.

Panel discussions examined various issues including the threat posed by ISIS repression and authoritarian governments. Religious leaders from Iran, Nigeria and Japan spoke on the present state of FoRB in their countries.

The meeting saw a drafting of recommendations for civil society, as part of an attempt to bridge the gap between IPPFoRB and civil society and to encourage consultation and collaboration on FoRB issues.

In early 2016, the IPPFoRB Steering Group and Secretariat established a three-year plan for network participants. The plan envisioned growing IPPFoRB as an international network of parliamentarians who would become agents of change at home and internationally.

One part of the plan involved broadening partnerships, so in August 2016 IPPFoRB partnered with the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) in Bangkok, Thailand for a “school” on FoRB. That was followed up by IPPFoRB’s first fact-finding and solidarity visit to Myanmar (Burma), in partnership with USCIRF. IPPFoRB members and USCIRF staff met with government officials, religious groups and civil society to address threats to FoRB as well as lasting solutions. Constitutional reform and changes to so-called race and religion protection laws that restrict FoRB were the delegation’s primary interests.

September 2016 saw approximately 130 parliamentarians gather in Berlin, Germany for the Second International Parliamentarians Conference, titled “An Embattled Right: Protecting and Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief.” In partnership with the KAE, the conference featured a symposium of parliamentarians, with workshops and seminars aimed at strengthening participants’ ability to defend FoRB. The focus was on strengthening linkages, developing relationships, increasing co-operation, improving resources and the fostering of new FoRB legislative initiatives.

Examples of multilateral challenges to FoRB and regional dimensions of IPPFoRB’s work were presented, and once again parliamentarians had the opportunity to sign letters that addressed specific concerns in Eritrea, Pakistan, Sudan, Myanmar and Vietnam.

This conference also featured a high-level political session hosted by the German Bundestag’s Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) group, opened by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and featuring real-world advice from Pakistani, Burmese, and Yazidi religious minority parliamentarians. Discussion built on practical ways to create and operate regional networks of parliamentarians.

In 2017, the annual Trygve Lie Symposium, held in New York, looked specifically at Article 18 of the UDHR. The symposium brought together UN and government officials, experts, and civil-society representatives to share best practices and discuss how to encourage nations to uphold FoRB.

In conjunction with the symposium in New York, IPPFoRB brought together ten female MPs from around the globe to meet with experts, UN officials, and representatives of NGOs. The goal was to discuss synergies between religious freedoms

and women's rights, and to consider how best to promote both rights. It was unusual for a group of female leaders to speak so clearly about the need for leaders to understand the positive correlation between freedom of religion and women's rights.

In 2017, IPPFoRB received three-year funding commitments from the Norwegian Parliament and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This enabled the hiring of a full-time coordinator and support for several smaller regional projects. A group from IPPFoRB visited Nepal in October 2017 to support MPs and the local Secretariat, who had established a FoRB chapter. They met with a small group of concerned parliamentarians, Nepal's Human Rights Commission, and members of religious and civil-society groups who had grave concerns over legislation that could negatively affect freedoms promised in Nepal's new constitution. Together, they urged Nepal's government to take steps to avoid religiously driven anti-conversion legislation.

By 2017, 150 parliamentarians from more than 45 countries were actively participating in the IPPFoRB network, and regional and national networks were also being formed.

Unfortunately, persecution on the basis of religion has continued to rise since then. Abusive governments continue to prevent individuals from practicing their faith through violent and repressive means. They are becoming much bolder in using 'national security' laws and regulations to persecute religious minorities. Examples abound, but Russia's Yarovaya Law is one case in point, as a law designed to penalize terrorists has been used primarily to punish religious minorities who share their beliefs in public places. Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular, have been targeted by Russian authorities. In response, IPPFoRB has initiated a "prisoner of conscience" project in which network participants can "adopt" a prisoner of conscience and lobby for his or her freedom.

To inform and educate parliamentarians, IPPFoRB has launched the IPPFoRB Academy, which enables up to about a dozen parliamentarians to gather in one location to learn about and to discuss RF issues. The intent is to encourage MPs to create connections so that they are not isolated as they return to their countries with a commitment to change and, hopefully, to establishing their own national network. At the conclusion of the Academy, learners are expected to take the initiative in a specific way – starting a FoRB group, setting up a support Secretariat or proposing a piece of legislation.

With global and local religious restrictions on the rise, why continue to fight for FoRB? The effort is based on the same motivation upon which IPPFoRB was established initially – that all people are of equal value and have the basic right to believe as they choose and to practice that belief. The struggle to protect this right

continues, as perpetrators of severe violations of religious freedom are increasingly well-networked. Religious repression is changing and becoming much more sophisticated.

Extremist groups are developing transnational linkages, such as groups pledging allegiance to ISIS or religious leaders sharing their tactics with fellow extremists in other countries. China's leaders, in particular, are perfecting means to restrict FoRB, steadily placing new limitations on online discussions, gatherings, financing and construction of religious buildings through President Xi's "Sinicization" policy and revised regulations on religious minorities. The pervasive use of electronic land-based and online surveillance is an easy way for abusive governments to control both religious minorities and political dissent. They are currently exporting these tactics around the globe.

As Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, stated in October 2016:

The situation of freedom of religion or belief has dramatically deteriorated in many parts of the world, and countless people suffer harassment, intimidation, discrimination and persecution. One of the silver linings in these gloomy days is the IPPFoRB, which has brought together Parliamentarians from all over the world who are committed to using their influence on behalf of religious freedom for all. This new dimension of advocacy is a source of hope, which is so urgently needed today.

Bielefeldt is right; there is still hope. IPPFoRB has made a commitment to finding leaders who will stand up to oppression and to standing alongside them. In two and a half years, IPPFoRB has progressed from a handful of like-minded parliamentarians with a budding vision to a global, internationally recognized body that continues to grow – not only in numbers, but in its determination to place the promotion and protection of FoRB at the centre of every government's agenda.

As German Chancellor Merkel stated in September 2016, "Within a very short time, the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief has established itself as the central actor for this essential fundamental right. The fact that there is now such a strong network gives strength, courage and confidence."

The Oslo Charter for Freedom of Religion or Belief

International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB)

Whereas severe violations of freedom of religion or belief continue to occur around the world, perpetrated by both governments and non-state actors;

Whereas studies indicate an increase in restrictions on the free practice of religion or belief, with the majority of the global population living in countries where their freedom to peacefully practice their faith could be restricted;

Whereas an increasing number of governments, international institutions, and non-governmental organizations are recognizing this emerging crisis and committing resources to ensure greater respect for this fundamental freedom;

Whereas the freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a universal, established, and non-derogable human right, enshrined in international treaties at the United Nations, binding conventions of regional bodies, and domestic constitutions;

The signatories reaffirm Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is an inalienable human right, encompassing the right to hold or not hold any faith or belief, to change belief, and to be free from coercion to adopt a different belief.

Freedom of religion or belief is a unique human right, in that to be fully enjoyed other incorporated rights must also be respected, such as the freedoms of expression, assembly, education, and movement.

The signatories commit to:

Promote freedom of religion or belief for all persons through their work and respective institutions.

Enhance global cooperation by endeavouring to work across geographical, political, and religious lines.

Undertake efforts to jointly promote freedom of religion or belief, share information, and mobilize effective responses.

(Parliamentarians support this declaration of principles in their personal capacity and not as representatives of their government, political party or any other body.)