

Global restrictions on religion: A 2010 summary

Brian J Grim*

Abstract

This article summarizes key findings from the Global Restrictions on Religion report,¹ a study released in December 2009 by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. The report covers 198 countries and territories, representing more than 99% of the world's population for the two-year period of July 2006 through June 2008. It distinguishes government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion before combining them in a joint index.

Keywords Religious freedom, index, statistics, sociology, government restrictions on religion, social hostilities involving religion.

General comments

First, the study recognizes that religious beliefs and practices may be infringed upon not only by government actions but also by social groups, organizations and individuals. And, indeed, our study shows that in some places social hostilities may have an even greater impact than do government actions.

Second, government restrictions include not only national laws and policies, but also actions by local governments and officials,

* Brian J Grim (*1959) is a Senior Research Fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, and a research affiliate with the Population Research Institute at Penn State University and with Boston University's Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs. Prior to joining the Forum, he managed the international data initiative for the Association of Religion Data Archives housed at Penn State University. He has extensive overseas experience, having worked for 20 years as an educator, researcher, and development coordinator in China, the former USSR, Kazakhstan, Europe, Malta, and the Middle East. E-mail: bgrim@pewforum.org. This is a slightly adapted version of a "Briefing on U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy: The Outlook for 2010" presented on 3 February 2010 by Grim to the "United States House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight" sponsored by its Chair Congressman Russ Carnahan. The American spelling and idiom has been retained.

¹ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life: Global Restrictions on Religion. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center 2009, 69 p. Online: <http://pewforum.org/newassets/images/reports/restrictions/restrictionsfullreport.pdf>.

which we find account for a sizeable portion of government restrictions worldwide.

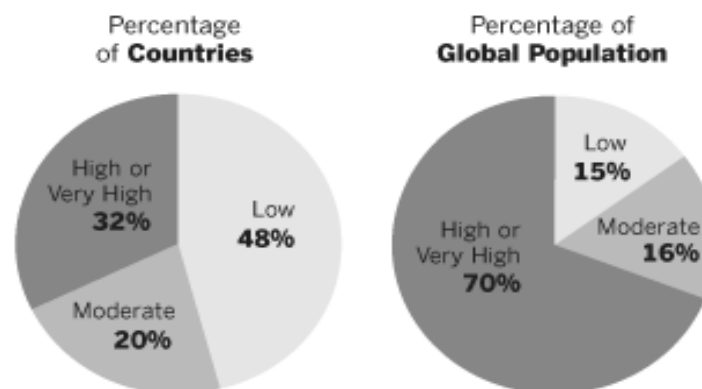
Third, when people think of religious freedom, they may have in mind the degree of religious dynamism and diversity in a country, which the Pew Forum has measured in previous studies. This report, however, focuses on the other side of the coin, that is, impediments to religious beliefs and practices.

And fourth, the Pew Forum takes a strictly non-advocacy role in this research, recognizing that every country studied has some restrictions on religion, and that there may be strong public support in particular countries for certain restrictions. We'll leave it to others to consider how these findings might or might not affect advocacy and policy.

With these points in mind, our study finds that 64 nations, or about one-third of countries today, have high restrictions on religion either as a result of government restrictions or social hostilities involving religion, or both.² Because some of the most restrictive countries are very populous, that means about 70% of the world's population lives in countries with high or very high restrictions on religion, the brunt of which often falls on religious minorities.

Global Restrictions on Religion

A minority of countries have high restrictions on religion, but these countries contain most of the world's population.



Note: Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life
Global Restrictions on Religion, December 2009

² Global Restrictions on Religious Freedom, 53ff. Summary of Results: <http://tinyurl.com/3yqm895>.

Methodology

This overall finding is based on a series of more than 30 measures phrased as questions, such as, “Is public preaching limited by any level of government?” And on the social side, “Is there mob violence related to religion?” We answered the questions for each country by combing through two separate years of 16 widely cited and publicly available reports on international religious freedom by the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the United Nations Special Rapporteur, the Council of the European Union, and numerous other reports by other organizations, including Human Rights Watch and the Hudson Institute.³

Government restrictions on religion

Before discussing overall scores for countries, a few findings on the extent of different types of restrictions are worth mentioning. First, considering government restrictions:⁴

In two-thirds of countries, some level of government interfered with worship or other religious practices, including religious expression and affiliation. In nearly half of countries, members of one or more religious groups were killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their homes by some state or local government actor. In more than a quarter of countries, there was widespread government intimidation of one or more religious groups. In nearly a quarter of countries, the national government did not intervene in cases of discrimination or abuses against religious groups. In more than 80% of countries, governments clearly discriminated against one or more religious groups by giving preferential support or favors to some religious group(s) and not others. In 60% of countries, registration requirements for religious groups adversely affected their ability to operate, or the requirements clearly discriminated against certain religious groups.

³ Global Restrictions on Religious Freedom, 31-52. Methodology: <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=500>.

⁴ Global Restrictions on Religious Freedom, 6-16. Government Restrictions Index (GRI): <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=492>.

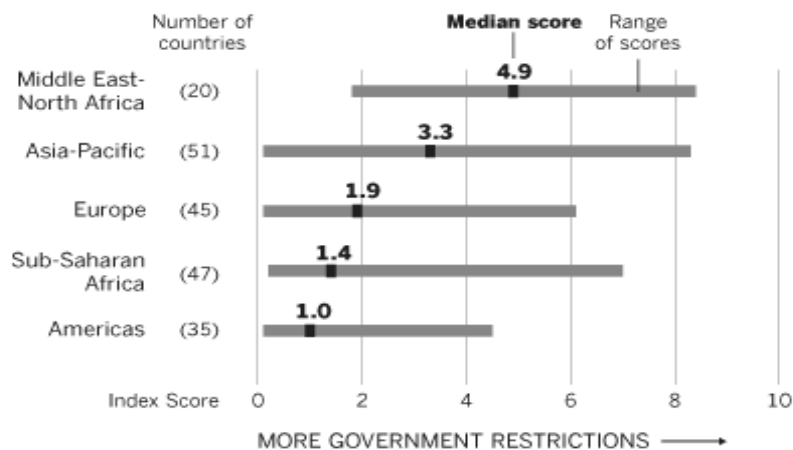
Social hostilities involving religion⁵

In more than 70% of countries, there were crimes, malicious acts or violence motivated by religious hatred or bias. In more than 10% of countries, there were acts of sectarian or communal violence between religious groups. In nearly 90% of countries, public tensions between or within religious groups were present, and these tensions involved violence in more than six-in-ten countries. In 30% of countries, religion-related terrorist groups were active in recruitment or fundraising. Such groups committed violent acts in nearly one-in-ten countries. In more than half of countries, religious groups themselves attempted to prevent other religious groups from being able to operate. In nearly a third of countries, individuals were assaulted or displaced from their homes in retaliation for specific religious activities considered offensive or threatening to the majority faith, including preaching and other forms of religious expression.

Geographical comparisons

Looking at how these restrictions play out across the world, the region of the world with the highest level of restrictions is the Middle East and North Africa, which has nearly five times the median level of government restrictions and more than seven times the level of social hostilities involving religion as are found in the Americas region, which has the lowest overall average on both measures. The Asia-Pacific region has the

Government Restrictions on Religion by Region



Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life • *Global Restrictions on Religion, December 2009*

⁵ Global Restrictions on Religious Freedom, 17-26. Social Hostilities Index (SHI): <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=494>.

second highest average level of government restrictions, more than three times the average of the Americas, and more than half again as high as Europe's average. Sub-Saharan Africa has, on average, slightly lower government restrictions than Europe.

The situation in the Asia-Pacific region, however, is mixed because it includes some countries and territories with low restrictions – such as Japan and Taiwan – but also includes some countries with very high government restrictions, such as China and Burma. Also, of the 10 countries with very high government restrictions, only two are in the Middle East and North Africa (Saudi Arabia and Egypt), while seven are in Asia (Iran, Uzbekistan, China, Burma, the Maldives, Malaysia and Brunei). Only one is in Sub-Saharan Africa (Eritrea). A similar picture is seen when looking at the 11 countries with very high levels of social hostilities involving religion. Six are in Asia-Pacific (India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) and four are in the Middle East and North Africa (Iraq, Israel, Sudan and Saudi Arabia). One is in Sub-Saharan Africa (Somalia).

Government Restrictions

Very High

Top 5% of scores

SCORES FROM 6.7 TO 8.4

Saudi Arabia

Iran

Uzbekistan

China

Egypt

Burma (Myanmar)

Maldives

Eritrea

Malaysia

Brunei

Social Hostilities

Very High

Top 5% of scores

SCORES FROM 6.8 TO 9.4

Iraq

India

Pakistan

Afghanistan

Indonesia

Bangladesh

Somalia

Israel

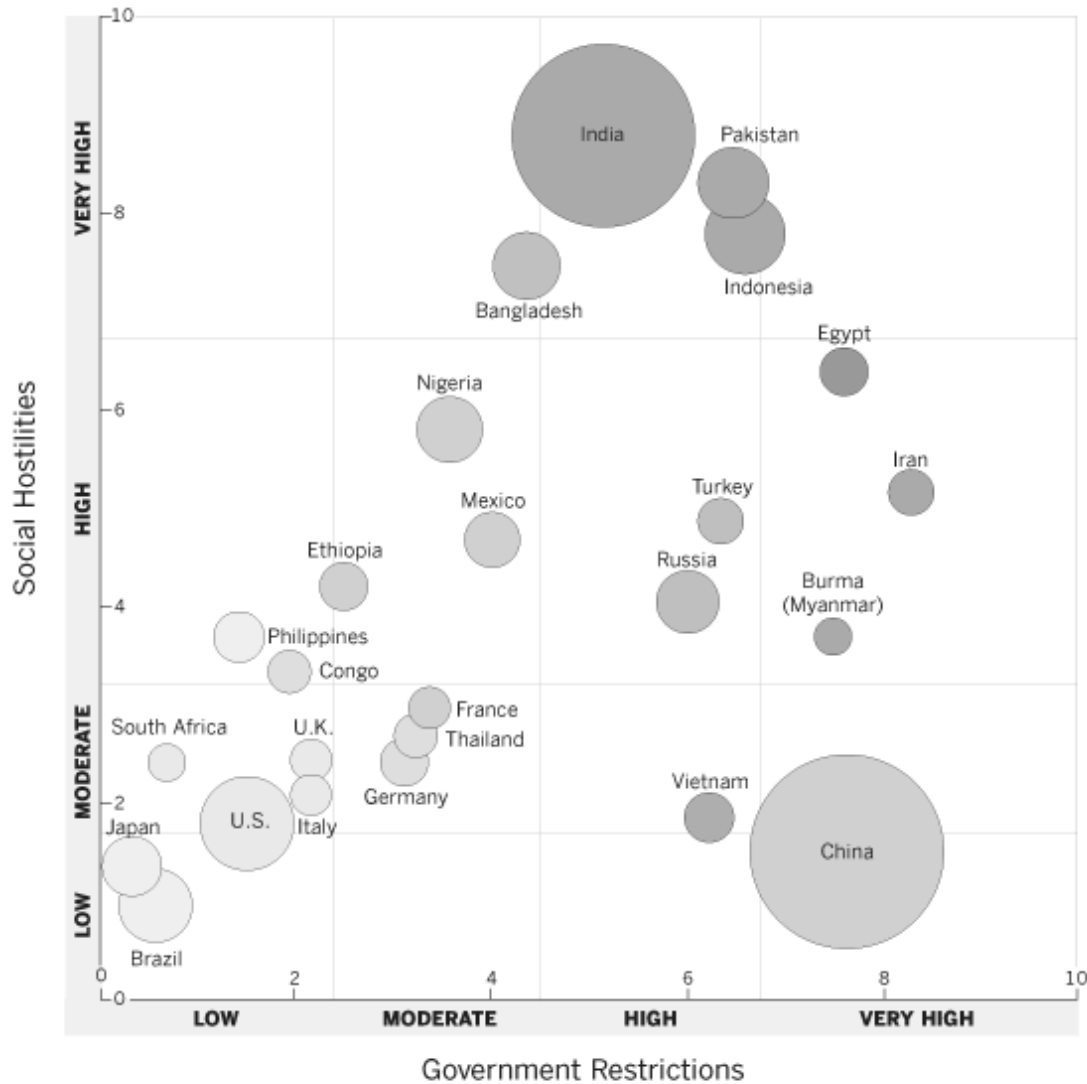
Sri Lanka

Sudan

Saudi Arabia

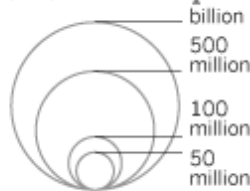
The highest overall restrictions are found in countries where government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion are both high. In the Global Restrictions on Religion report, we've plotted the 25 most populous countries by their scores on both measures, with increases in social hostilities going up the chart and increases in government restrictions going to the right. If a country has both high government restrictions and high social hostilities, it will be

located more toward the top right corner of the chart, as are Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt and Iran. Since Saudi Arabia has a relatively small population, it is not included on this chart, but if it were, it would be located in the top right square.

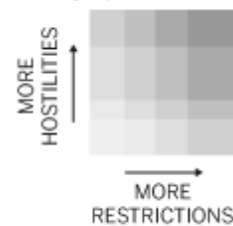


Note: The Pew Forum categorized the levels of government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion by percentiles. Countries with scores in the top 5% on each index were categorized as "very high." The next highest 15% of scores were categorized as "high," and the following 20% were categorized as "moderate." The bottom 60% of scores were categorized as "low."

Circles are sized proportionally to each country's population (2009)



Colors are based on each country's position on the chart.



While government restrictions and social hostilities tend to move in tandem, there are some notable exceptions.⁶ China and Vietnam have extremely high restrictions on religion imposed by the government but relatively fewer restrictions coming from people and groups in society. Although social tensions over religion appear to be on the rise in Chinese society, particularly in the Tibet and Xinjiang Autonomous Regions, China is on the low end of the Social Hostilities Index for the period covered by this study, which may help explain the religious growth and dynamism present in China today.⁷

On the other end of the spectrum, you can see India in the top-center part of the chart, indicating that social hostilities tend to be higher than government restrictions, though both tend to be high. Nigeria is another example of a country where social hostilities are a more potent force than government restrictions on religion. In the bottom left-hand corner of the chart is a cluster of countries. Only two of the 25 most populous countries are low on both measures – Japan and Brazil. The United States falls into the moderately restrictive category in terms of social hostilities, primarily due to frequent, religiously-biased hate crimes. For instance, each year law enforcement officials report about 1,400 religiously-biased hate crimes in the United States, spread across nearly all 50 states. So, in sum, the scatter plot provides a way to understand the main sources of restrictions on religious groups within a given country.

⁶ Although it is very likely that more restrictions exist than are reported by the 16 primary sources, taken together the sources are sufficiently comprehensive to provide a good estimate of the levels of restrictions in almost all countries. The one major exception is North Korea. The sources clearly indicate that North Korea's government is among the most repressive in the world with respect to religion as well as other civil and political liberties. (The U.S. State Department's 2008 Report on International Religious Freedom, for example, says that "Genuine freedom of religion does not exist" in North Korea.) But because North Korean society is effectively closed to outsiders and independent observers lack regular access to the country, the sources are unable to provide the kind of specific, timely information that the Pew Forum categorized and counted ("coded," in social science parlance) for this quantitative study. Therefore, the report does not include scores for North Korea.

⁷ Brian J Grim: Religion in China on the Eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. 2 May 2008. <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=301>.

Conclusion

Finally, the overall results generally show that where government restrictions on religion are high, so are social hostilities involving religion though with some exceptions. It is important to remember, however, that our study is just a snapshot of a particular time period, and situations can and do change. For instance, although Malaysia was among the countries with the highest government restrictions, it had low social hostilities involving religion during the time period studied. However, had the recent social violence⁸ surrounding the dispute over whether Christians can use the word “Allah” for “God” happened during the study period, Malaysia’s social hostility score would have been higher.

As noted sociologist Peter Berger has stated, 21st century is a “global age of explosive, pervasive religiosity.”⁹ Accordingly, this study is part of a larger, ongoing effort – the Global Religious Futures Project, jointly funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation – that aims to increase knowledge and understanding of religion around the world. You can find additional resources on this and other related issues at our website: PewForum.org.

⁸ Associated Press: Malaysia king warns of crackdown on religious hate. 15 March 2010. <http://pewforum.org/news/rss.php?NewsID=19819>.

⁹ Peter Berger: Religion in a Globalizing World. Pew Forum’s biannual Faith Angle Conference on religion, politics and public life. Event Transcript. 4 December 2006. <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=136>.