



NHSMUN

Background Guide | *UNHRC*

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Dear delegates,

Welcome to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). My name is Shruthi Nadathur, and I am ecstatic to be your Director for Session I for NHSMUN 2026! I am looking forward to meeting each and every one of you and discovering how you, as delegates, approach contemporary global challenges.

I was born and raised in Plano, Texas, a large suburb in the Dallas-Fort-Worth metropolitan area. I am currently a sophomore at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles, California. I am double majoring in Political Economy and Journalism with a minor in Law & Public Policy. I intend to work toward becoming either a political journalist or a human rights lawyer (contrasting fields but we will go with the flow!)

On campus, I am an opinion staff writer and copy editor for the Daily Trojan, a student ambassador for the Dornsife College of Letters Arts and Sciences, and a research assistant for the Near Crisis Project. I am also involved in political clubs on campus. Many of my personal passions revolve around music and the performing arts. I can play four instruments (piano, violin, guitar & viola) and am always looking to improve my musical abilities. You will find me reading (my favorite genre is a tie between psychological thrillers and political memoirs), crocheting, or catching up on the most recent edition of Vogue.

I was an Assistant Director of UNCAC for NHSMUN 2025, and I am grateful to return this year as a director. I began competing in MUN in high school and have continued as a member of the University of Southern California's Model United Nations team, where I am currently the Director of External Relations. I appreciated the way MUN combined my love for international affairs with my appreciation for storytelling, and as a result, I have a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and diplomacy. NHSMUN may seem daunting but focus on learning from your experience here: through researching and discussing our topics, you will gain insights into perspectives you've never considered before. At the end of the day, you will grow and prosper in the field of global diplomacy and multi-perspective thinking.

I wish you the best of luck at this year's conference, and I look forward to meeting you all very soon!

Best,

Shruthi Nadathur

United Nations Human Rights Council

Session I

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Esteemed delegates,

My name is Jessica Sadek, and I am more than pleased to be your director for UN Human Rights Council.

I am an international relations major with a minor in economics at William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. I have been involved in Model UN since high school and ever since then, MUN has had a special place in my heart.

I grew to love Model UN even more here at NHSMUN and made many beautiful memories in NYC. Outside of Model UN, I tutor adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I am also a member of a sorority, Pi Beta Phi, where my involvement ranges from helping host our big events to dodging volleyballs while trying to photograph our volleyball team.

As I am looking forward to this committee and setting a high for everyone, I expect everybody to be most respectful and mindful of the words they exchange. Be most respectful inside and outside committees, to your fellow delegates and your dais. With that being said, I cannot wait to see you all in March. In the meantime, if you have any questions, do contact me, and I will be more than happy to answer your questions!

Best,

Jessica Sadek

United Nations Human Rights Council

Session II

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A NOTE ON RESEARCH AND PREPARATION

Delegate research and preparation is a critical element of attending NHSMUN and enjoying the debate experience. We have provided this Background Guide to introduce the topics that will be discussed in your committee. We encourage and expect each of you to critically explore the selected topics and be able to identify and analyze their intricacies upon arrival to the conference.

The task of preparing for the conference can be challenging, but to assist delegates, we have updated our [Beginner Delegate Guide](#), [Advanced Delegate Guide](#), [Research Guide](#), and [Rules of Procedure Guide](#). In particular, these guides contain more detailed instructions on how to prepare a position paper and excellent sources that delegates can use for research. Use these resources to your advantage. They can help transform a sometimes overwhelming task into what it should be: an engaging, interesting, and rewarding experience.

To accurately represent a country, delegates must be able to articulate its policies. Accordingly, NHSMUN requires each delegation (the one or two delegates representing a country in a committee) to write a position paper for each topic on the committee's agenda. In delegations with two students, we strongly encourage each student to research each topic to ensure that they are both prepared to debate throughout the committee. More information about how to write and format position papers can be found in the Research Guide. To summarize, position papers should be structured into three sections.

I: Topic Background – This section should describe the history of the topic as it would be described by the delegate's country. Delegates do not need to give an exhaustive account of the topic. It is best to focus on the details that are most important to the delegation's policy and proposed solutions.

II: Country Policy – This section should discuss the delegation's policy regarding the topic. Each paper should state the policy in plain terms and include the relevant statements, statistics, and research that support the effectiveness of the policy. Comparisons with other global issues are also appropriate.

III. Proposed Solutions – This section should detail the delegation's proposed solutions to address the topic. Descriptions of each solution should be thorough. Each idea should clearly connect to the specific problem it aims to solve and identify potential obstacles to implementation and how they can be avoided. The solution should be a natural extension of the country's policy.

Each topic's position paper should be **no more than 10 pages** long double-spaced with standard margins and 12 point font size. This is a maximum; **3–5 pages per topic is often a suitable length**. The paper must be written from the perspective of your assigned country and should articulate the policies you will espouse at the conference.

Each delegation is responsible for submitting position papers on or before **February 20, 2026**. If a delegate wishes to receive detailed feedback from the committee's dais, a position must be submitted on or before **January 30, 2026**. The papers received by this earlier deadline will be reviewed by the dais of each committee and returned prior to your arrival at the conference. Instructions on how to submit position papers will be shared directly with faculty advisors.

Complete instructions for how to submit position papers will be sent to faculty advisers via email. If delegations are unable to submit their position papers on time, please contact us at nhsmun@imuna.org.

Delegations that do not submit position papers will be ineligible for awards.

COMMITTEE HISTORY

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was created in 2006 by the General Assembly (GA) through resolution 60/251.¹ It aims to strengthen the protection of human rights and address violations. It replaced the Commission on Human Rights, which had existed since 1946.

The old Commission helped shape the international law of human rights.² This Commission wrote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.³ It also guided the making of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1966.⁴ These documents became the foundation of international human rights law. The old Commission reported back to the Economic and Social Council, limiting the actions it could take. It also faced heavy criticism for letting states with poor records become members and the lack of efficient mechanisms to deal with urgent human rights crises.⁵ It was often unable to respond until its annual meeting, permitting states to act with relative impunity in the meantime.

To fix this, the General Assembly set up the UNHRC as a body under its authority. It makes the human rights oversight more systematic and effective.⁶ The new Council created the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which checks the human rights record of every UN member state.⁷ The UNHRC has 47 members, elected by region, with limits on how long they can serve.⁸ The members of the council serve for a period of three years and may not be immediately re-elected after having served two consecutive terms.⁹

The UNHRC is led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). It is responsible for human rights activities, such as reporting violations, supporting governments to establish awareness, and other activities.¹⁰ The UNHRC maintains offices worldwide to support and investigate legal matters related to human rights. The main headquarters are in New York and Geneva. The Council meets three sessions per year in Geneva to review human rights situations, as well as address urgent issues. The topics discussed during these sessions are chosen based on the member states' proposals or by reports made by the High Commissioner.¹¹ Member states also can order special sessions when necessary to respond to serious human rights crises. The last extraordinary session was held on February 7, 2025, to address the situation of human rights in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹²

Since its creation, the UNHRC has become the main UN body for human rights. With the special rapporteurs, independent experts, fact-finding missions, and annual missions, they aim to protect and promote human rights worldwide. In this way, the Council continues the work of the old Commission but with stronger tools and greater oversight.

1 "A Rough Guide to the Human Rights Council," Universal Rights Group, accessed September, 2025, <https://www.universal-rights.org/human-rights-rough-guides/a-rough-guide-to-the-human-rights-council/>.

2 "Introduction," United Nations Human Rights Council, accessed September, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/chr/commission-on-human-rights>.

3 "History of the Declaration," United Nations, accessed September, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/udhr/history-of-the-declaration>.

4 Katherine Short, "From Commission to Council," January, 2008, <https://sur.conectas.org/en/from-commission-to-council/>.

5 Short, "From Commission to Council."

6 "United Nations", Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Drafting History, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://research.un.org/en/undhr/ecosoc/4>

7 "Universal Periodic Review (UPR): What is it? How is it relevant to my work?," UN Sustainable Development Group, accessed September, 2025, <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/strengthening-international-human-rights/universal-periodic-review>.

8 "OHCHR," Membership of the Human Rights Council, accessed August 24, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/membership>

9 . Membership of the Human Rights Council, "OHCHR"

10 Welcome to the Human Rights Council, "OHCHR."

11 "Universal Rights Group," A Rough Guide to the Human Rights Council, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://www.universal-rights.org/human-rights-rough-guides/a-rough-guide-to-the-human-rights-council/>

12 "OHCHR," 37th special session of the Human Rights Council on the situation of human rights in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo- 7 February 2025, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/special-sessions/session37/37-special-session>



Protecting and Expanding Civic Space

Photo Credit: Wistula

Civic space is a basis for democracy. It is the places (streets, screens, and meeting rooms) where people organize, speak, assemble, and push for change.¹ When this space is open, trust grows and governments work better. It allows people to access information, assembly, freely participate, and communicate with others by expressing their opinions.² However, seven in ten people live where civic space is scarce, and global measures show civic space at its weakest since 2018.³ The question for this committee is how to keep that space open.

The restriction of civic space includes targeting the rights of peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression and opinion, and to protest, among others. The

CIVICUS 2024 report found that detention of protesters was the most prevalent violation of the year.⁴ An estimated 44 percent of countries also have laws that restrict international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).⁵ This has affected international funding and has targeted international activists. Three out of five countries have been categorized as obstructed or closed countries for civic space.⁶ AccessNow also estimated that there have been 296 internet shutdowns in 54 countries.⁷ This means a 35 percent increase of countries doing internet shutdowns.⁸ Internet shutdowns affect human rights, like freedom of expression and civic spaces, in the digital sphere.

Protecting civic space and the human rights related to it is

important. Violating civic space violates various international laws, like Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁹

Likewise, protecting and expanding civic space is necessary for the achievement of international goals, such as SDG 16. To protect civic space, we must understand its importance and evolution throughout history. Ultimately, protecting and expanding civic space is not merely about defending rights. It is about ensuring democratic societies and allowing citizens to participate in decision-making to build a more inclusive future.

TOPIC BACKGROUND

History of Civic Space

Civic spaces can be physical places, like public squares or streets, and also movements, like

those championed by NGOs.¹⁰ Recently, civic space has adapted also into digital spaces. Civic space has evolved alongside political, economic, and cultural changes.

The idea of a civic space dates back to Ancient Greece. Greek teachers believed people could learn good behavior through natural law. Aristotle believed that the ultimate

¹ “OHCHR and protecting and expanding civic space,” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), accessed August 18, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space.

² “The Role of the United Nations in Protecting and Promoting Civic Space,” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), accessed June 24, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space/role-united-nations-protecting-and-promoting-civic-space.

³ “PEOPLE POWER UNDER ATTACK 2024,” Civicus, accessed August 18, 2025, monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/; Elene Panchulidze, “A New Wave of Repression on Civic Space: Democracy Support Community Failing to Respond,” European Democracy Hub, last edited September 13, 2024, europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/a-new-wave-of-repression-on-civic-space/.

⁴ CIVICUS, “PEOPLE POWER UNDER ATTACK 2024.”

⁵ Siân Herbert, Restricting space for civil society, (The GSDRC Research Helpdesk, 2015), www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/HDQ1266.pdf.

⁶ “RIGHTS REVERSED - A DOWNWARD SHIFT IN CIVIC SPACE (2019-2023),” CIVICUS Monitor: Tracking Civic Space, accessed August 18, 2025, monitor.civicus.org/rights-reversed-2019-to-2023/.

⁷ “Lives on hold: internet shutdowns in 2024,” AccessNow, accessed August 18, 2025, www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-2024/.

⁸ AccessNow, “Lives on hold: internet shutdowns in 2024.”

⁹ *Legal Frameworks for Civic Space*, (New York: The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021), 2, www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2021-12/UNDP-ICNL-Legal-Framework-for-Civic-Space-A-Primer-EN.pdf.

¹⁰ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “OHCHR and protecting and expanding civic space.”

goal of human life was achieving a good society. This only can be achieved with engaged citizens participating in collective decision-making and pursuing the common good.¹¹ Democracy was a large part of daily life, so Athenians were expected to join in public activities.¹² The agora, a public open space, was the main spot for these activities. Citizens would gather to debate governance, discuss laws, and have a significant role in decision-making. Buildings like the Bouleuterion hosted the Council of 500, which was the exclusive assembly for representatives elected by the citizens.¹³

At this time, not everyone could join civic life in Ancient Greece. Women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded. The rules were also not the same in every city-state. For instance, Spartan women had more rights than others in the Classical Period.¹⁴ They took part in most areas of political and social life in Sparta. On the other hand, Athenian women had no voice in politics. Legally, Athenian women could only be represented

by men, either their husbands or by another male relative. Aristotle criticized the freedom and power of Spartan women. He argued that their autonomy was one cause of Sparta's decline.¹⁵ Despite the exclusions from participation for certain groups, Athens is considered the home of "Demokratia," which means "rule by the people."

In contrast, Ancient Egypt had a more closed civic space.¹⁶ Power centered on the pharaoh, who was seen as a God. Civic life was tied to religion and state control, leaving little space for ordinary citizens. Most Egyptians worked on agriculture and had little participation in public life. Only those who had high positions were able to actively participate in civic spaces, which were mainly linked to religious positions. As public life revolved around religion, the main points for people to gather were the temples. This class system limiting civic space lasted for over 3,000 years.¹⁷

In the Persian Empire, rulers had total power and very limited civic space.¹⁸ In Imperial China, the

emperor had most of the power, and government decisions were carried out by a group of trained officials. Ordinary people didn't have much of a say in politics, since civic life was controlled from the top down.¹⁹ In Ancient Rome, civic space was similar to Greece. The Forum Romanum was the center of public life. People gathered for politics, court trials, and social events. During the Middle Ages, civic life was largely dominated by feudal structures. There was a tight link between monarchy and the Church. Therefore, feudal lords and the Church had considerable control over the lives of citizens and their participation in political spaces.²⁰

During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the concept of civic society changed. Revolutions, like the French Revolution in 1789, were highly influenced by civic space.²¹ The invention of the printing press also helped to expand ideas faster. Pamphlets, newspapers, and books circulated widely. It allowed debate and discussion beyond physical spaces.²²

11 "The Evolution of Civil Society: From Ancient Philosophy to Modern Activism," PolSci Institute, January 28, 2023, accessed August 19, 2023, sociology.institute/sociological-theories-concepts/evolution-civil-society-ancient-modern-activism/.

12 Mark Cartwright, "Athenian Democracy," World History Encyclopedia, April, 2018, www.worldhistory.org/Athenian_Democracy/.

13 Dr. Jeffrey Becker, "Introduction to Greek Architecture", Smarthistory, accessed June 21, 2025, smarthistory.org/introduction-to-greek-architecture/.

14 Joshua J. Mark, "Spartan Women," World History Encyclopedia, June 14, 2021, www.worldhistory.org/article/123/spartan-women/.

15 Mark, "Spartan Women."

16 Laila El Baradei, "Despotic Ancient Egyptian Pharaohs: Feared, Loved or Something ed or Something Else?," *American University in Cairo*, (2021), fount.aucegypt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5370&context=faculty_journal_articles.

17 "What happened to the ancient Egyptians?," BBC, accessed August 20, 2025, www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zf4cxyc#zg2nnsk7.

18 Joshua J. Mark, "Persian Government," World History Encyclopedia, April 1, 2016, www.worldhistory.org/Persian_Government/.

19 Yuri Pines, "China's Imperial Institution," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, (2019), doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.392.

20 "Political history in the medieval era – an overview," The National Archives, accessed August 20, 2025, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/medieval-political-history/.

21 Uzair Khan, "Revolutionary Flames: The French Revolution's Decade of Turmoil and Transformation (1789–1799)," The Medium, August 9, 2024, medium.com/@uzair_khan/revolutionary-flames-the-french-revolutions-decade-of-turmoil-and-transformation-1789-1799-a31ddfd32729.

22 "The long and short reasons for why Revolution broke out in France in 1789," Swansea University, accessed August 20, 2025, www.swansea.ac.uk/history/history-study-guides/the-long-and-short-reasons-for-why-revolution-broke-out-in-france-in-1789/.

Public discussion, liberty, and rights were highly encouraged by different thinkers.²³ For example, Montesquieu and his text *Spirit of the Laws* advocated for a separation of judicial, legislative, and executive power. Voltaire's works of *Lettres Philosophiques* and *Dictionnaire Philosophique* were banned in France. The success of the revolutions empowered civic space. It showed that open discussion could lead to real change. Declarations of rights, such as the US Bill of Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, institutionalized freedoms of speech, assembly, and association.²⁴

All this history has led to the concept we have today of civic space, which is linked to human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created in 1948 and established clear guidelines for freedom of assembly and expression.²⁵ It was a response to World War II and the Holocaust, aiming to protect citizens worldwide. In 1966, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) restated the importance of civil and political rights, with Article 19 protecting freedom of expression and Article 21 protecting freedom of assembly and association.²⁶ These



Reading of the royal decrees limiting freedom of the press in the garden of the Palais-Royal, Paris, July 26, 1830. (Credit: Bichebois aîné)

international laws were designed to give people safe ways to share ideas, organize, and participate in public life. Since then, civic space has grown stronger in some places and weaker in others. For example, in the United States, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s used marches, sit-ins, and protests to challenge racial segregation.²⁷ One landmark achievement came in 1954, when the US Supreme Court struck down segregation in public schools, showing how civic space can be used to push societies toward greater justice and equality.

After World War II, the term non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was established, although such organizations had already existed in various forms for centuries.²⁸ Since then, NGOs have grown exponentially, with an estimated 10 million worldwide. NGOs have become a modern expression of civic space. They provide citizens with platforms to assemble, organize, and make their voices heard. NGOs institutionalize public participation, ensuring that civic engagement is not just spontaneous but also

²³ Khan, "Revolutionary Flames: The French Revolution's Decade of Turmoil and Transformation (1789–1799)."

²⁴ Jeremy D. Popkin, *Declarations of Rights - Chapter: In The Cambridge History of Rights*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, 200–227.

²⁵ "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), accessed June 24, 2025, [ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights](https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights).

²⁶ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, accessed July 21, 2025, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

²⁷ "The Civil Rights Movement," Library of the Congress, accessed August 20, 2025, www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/post-war-united-states-1945-1968/civil-rights-movement/.

²⁸ Ryan Irwin, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, (Albany: University at Albany, 2015), scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=history_fac_scholar.



Facebook live with ThisTimeImVoting volunteers (Credit: European Parliament)

sustained. They serve as watchdogs protecting freedoms, advocates for marginalized groups, and bridges between local movements and international institutions. NGOs also help expand civic space into the digital age by defending online rights, mobilizing campaigns across borders, and training citizens in digital literacy.²⁹ NGOs connect people across borders, linking local struggles to international institutions. This creates a civic space that is global in scope, allowing protests in one country to spark solidarity movements worldwide.

Since the late twentieth century, civic space has also moved online.³⁰ The internet, social media, and mobile phones opened new ways for activism. These platforms make it easier to organize protests, get international support, and share news directly. It is almost impossible to think about a major political protest occurring without social media.³¹ However, the digital age also brings risks. The online space faces increased surveillance, censorship, and the spread of false information. On top of this, digital gaps mean not all communities can join fully. Delegates should

find solutions to the challenges of access to civic space. Especially new ones that are emerging due to its evolution and adaptation to our society changes.

The Emerging Digital Civic Space

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a clear turning point in civic engagement. To slow down the virus, many countries created barriers on the freedom of assembly through lockdowns and public gathering bans. As face-to-face gatherings became impossible, civic space began to shift online. Across Europe, many organizations and regions adopted platforms like Decidim, a digital assembly platform, to convene citizens and maintain feedback, even during lockdowns. Community organizations, volunteers, and civic tech initiatives also launched mapping tools, virtual town halls, and digital forums to coordinate responses and share information. This shift marked the new phase of civic movements with an increase in informal activism, organized by citizens rather than formal groups like NGOs or government bodies.³²

In East and Southeast Asia, youth-led movements embraced leaderless models which amplify

²⁹ “25 Facts and Stats about NGOs Worldwide,” Nonprofit Tech for Good, accessed August 20, 2025, techreport.ngo/previous/2017/facts-and-stats-about-ngos-worldwide.html.

³⁰ World Economic Forum, “Here’s How Technology Has Changed – and Changed Us – Over the Past 20 Years,” WEF Stories, November 2020, accessed June 29, 2025, www.weforum.org/stories/2020/11/heres-how-technology-has-changed-and-changed-us-over-the-past-20-years/.

³¹ Joshua A. Tucker, Megan Metzger, “Protest in the Age of Social Media,” The Medium, January 8, 2015, medium.com/carnegie-corporation-international-peace-and/protest-in-the-age-of-social-media-7ae9fd940b06.

³² Richard Youngs, Elene Panchulidze, and Carlotta Magoga, *A New Phase of Civic Movements: Implications for International Democracy Support*, (Brussels: European Democracy Hub, 2025) europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/A-New-Phase-of-Civic-Movements.pdf.

the voices of all participants and help better protect participating protestors. They also take advantage of the digital world to further push their message, often using pop culture references to push ideas to a larger audience and using visual and textual shorthand to communicate messages in a way that can evade state censorship.³³ In Belarus, Georgia, and Nicaragua, young activists relied on online tools and decentralized networks to evade restrictions, while in Thailand, protest art and pop culture became symbols of resistance.³⁴ In Nepal, when the government blocked 26 major social media platforms in 2025, youth mobilized both online and offline, showing how digital and street activism are now inseparable.

With the digital civic space evolution, accessibility of civic participation has increased. Previously, citizens were often unable to participate in community events and decisions, due to the lack of time and distance from the central government. However, digital platforms have now been proved essential for tangible outreach matters and mobilization. Several cities now host virtual public meetings with

city and county clerks and officials, and these meetings have had a profound impact. This can increase communication with government officials and overall strengthen citizen trust.³⁵ Yet, accessibility is uneven. Around 68 percent of people around the world still lack basic internet access, leaving them excluded from online civic life.³⁶

The same tools that expand participation have also been weaponized by governments. While technology has helped civic society grow, it is also used by governments to control civil society movements under security pretenses. This includes facial recognition systems, public cameras, and drones.³⁷ China, for instance, uses AI-driven cameras and facial recognition to track opponents, making anonymous protest nearly impossible and discouraging participation.³⁸ International laws and norms that revolve around the protection of the right to privacy could also address mass surveillance threats.

Democratic and authoritarian governments use technology in very different ways. In democratic countries, technology can be used to strengthen participation

and accountability through online voting systems, virtual town halls, and digital forums. While risks of misuse exist, democratic governments are generally constrained from targeting journalists or activists with surveillance.³⁹ By contrast, authoritarian governments use digital technology primarily for control and repression. In these systems, online spaces are tightly monitored and heavily restricted, leaving little room for free expression. Ongoing mass surveillance, AI-driven facial recognition, internet shutdowns, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and spyware software may also be used to violate freedom of expression in civic spaces. Advocates who speak against the government may now be targeted to subdue public participation.⁴⁰ Further, during election cycles, governments may censor online content and block website access that would allow for candidate exposure, which ultimately limits free flow of information.

There are some gaps between joining in civic life online and in person. Online participation means making sure everyone has equal access to the internet

33 "Youthquake: Youth-led Movements Shaking Up East and Southeast Asia," HRF, accessed August 12, 2025, hrf.org/latest/youthquake-youth-led-movements-shaking-up-east-and-southeast-asia/.

34 European Partnership for Democracy, A New Phase of Civic Movements, European Democracy Hub, May 2024, europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/A-New-Phase-of-Civic-Movements.pdf.

35 Kate Monica, "What Virtual Meetings Taught Us About Civic Participation," Route Fifty, April 23, 2021, www.route-fifty.com/digital-government/2021/04/virtual-meetings-taught-about-civic-participation/173658/.

36 Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere," Canadian Journal of Communication 28, no. 1 (2003): 9–30, doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2003v28n1a1352.

37 Don Bell, "Protest Under a Surveillance State Microscope," POGO, November 4, 2024, www.pogo.org/analysis/protest-under-a-surveillance-state-microscope.

38 Jay Stanley, "Machine Surveillance is Being Super-Charged by Large AI Models," ACLU, March 21, 2025, www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/machine-surveillance-is-being-super-charged-by-large-ai-models.

39 Zijun Mao, Weiting Zhang, and Wen Deng, "The effects of e-participation on voice and accountability: are there differences between countries?," *Information Technology for Development* 31, no. 2, 2024, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02681102.2024.2373745.

40 Clare Castillejo, Civic Space: Shrinking or Shifting?, ODI, February 2, 2021, odi.org/en/insights/civic-space-shrinking-or-shifting/.

and can take part in digital decision-making.⁴¹ But there is a challenge of protecting people while also protecting free speech. Rules intended to stop harm, like removing fake news, hateful posts, or copyright violations, can sometimes go too far and block free expression or limit privacy. But if there are not enough rules, harmful content can spread easily, putting people and communities at risk. The digital civic space faces threats from disinformation and potential hate speech, which affect democratic processes.⁴² When there is harmful content posted against a particular identity, this may lead to further intimidation and reluctance for civic space engagement.

For instance, there have been instances of women-targeted hate speech in civic spaces that have led to intimidation for women. Female participation in politics and the civic space has increased substantially throughout the world. Gendered harassment is one of the most visible threats to equal digital participation. In Germany, for example, almost 90 percent of female Bundestag members were the target of gender-based hatred. About 64 percent claimed exposure to hateful messages and 36 percent

received direct physical attacks in their homes or workplaces.⁴³ With these threats, it has become more difficult for women to freely participate in democratic civic spaces.

Yet alongside these risks, new technologies also offer opportunities to strengthen trust in democracy. Individuals can mobilize efficiently, share information to a wide audience, and feel empowered through widespread access to information. One of the clearest examples of digital tools expanding civic space came during the Arab Spring, the year of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa.⁴⁴ At a time when governments restricted free speech, assembly, and association, citizens used the internet to mobilize and communicate through online networks. This event led to a space for increased civic engagement due to the large number of individuals who expressed demands for social and political change.⁴⁵

New technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI), is also helping. The European Union funded a project entitled ITHACA, which utilizes AI to support local dialogues and online forums. It also works to empower vulnerable groups

by creating fairer rules for how data is used and by offering policy recommendations that encourage broader participation.⁴⁶ Blockchain technology provides another tool for civic engagement. Because blockchain records cannot be altered, they create transparent and accountable systems that anyone can verify.⁴⁷ This makes it useful for voting and tracking government actions. Blockchain can ensure that votes are securely recorded and easily checked. This strengthens trust in elections, raises awareness of corruption, and even helps increase voter turnout. In this way, both AI and blockchain show how digital innovation can reinforce civic space.

Online digital spaces have created diverse areas for communities world-wide to meet and collaborate from the comforts of their own homes. However, with this development comes further challenges due to government interference, increasing hate speech that limits civic space involvement, and increasing diversity barriers. The challenge for delegates is to ensure that digital tools strengthen democracy and accountability, rather than become instruments of repression.

41 *Securing our Human Rights in our Digital World*, (AUDRI, 2022), audri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Digital-Principles-AUDRI.pdf

42 Open Government Partnership, *Enhancing Digital Civic Space*, accessed June 25, 2025, www.opengovpartnership.org/topic/enhancing-digital-civic-space/.

43 Internews, *Online Gendered Disinformation and Hate Speech: The Global Landscape and Case Studies*, March 2023, internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/OnlineGenderedHateSpeech-20230307.pdf.

44 Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), *The Expansion of the Protest Movements in the Arab Region and the Shrinking of the Civic Space*, accessed June 25, 2025, www.annd.org/en/publications/details/the-expansion-of-the-protest-movements-in-the-arab-region-and-the-shrinking-of-the-civic-space.

45 Intissar Fakir, *Arab Civil Society after the Arab Spring: Weaker but Deeper*, Middle East Institute, July 1, 2019, www.mei.edu/publications/arab-civil-society-after-arab-spring-weaker-deeper.

46 ITHACA Project, *Innovation in Technology for Civic Applications (ITHACA)*, accessed June 25, 2025, www.ithaca-project.eu/.

47 Business Case Studies, *"What Is Blockchain-Based Voting Systems?"* accessed June 25, 2025, businesscasestudies.co.uk/what-is-blockchain-based-voting-systems/.

The Recent Shrinking of Civic Space

Civic space has been shrinking at an alarming rate in recent years. According to CIVICUS, in 2024 the share of people living in highly oppressive countries rose by 1.5 percent, meaning that over 72 percent of the global population now lives under these conditions.⁴⁸ Only 40 out of 198 countries currently have fully open civic space.⁴⁹ This marks a decline from 2020, when 43.4 percent of people lived in countries with limited civic space and 18.3 percent in countries where it was obstructed. In practice, a “limited” civic space means participation is heavily restricted; an “obstructed” space means rights exist on paper but are undermined in reality; and a “closed” space means freedoms of association, assembly, and expression are completely denied. The 2024 CIVICUS report concluded that global civic space is at its weakest point since 2018. This decline reflects not only authoritarian backsliding but also weakening protections in some democracies, making it a global, not regional, trend.⁵⁰

The closure of civic space can be seen in the persecution of protesters.



“Black Lives Matter” protestors kneeling on the ground to draw attention to racism. (Credit: PantheraLeo1359531)

In at least 76 countries, the right to protest is targeted.⁵¹ These include mass arrests and police violence against activists. Unfair arrests were reported in 58 countries. In 2025, at least 23 journalists were arrested while covering protests in the United States.⁵² During 2020, 145 journalists were arrested during Black Lives Matter protests.⁵³ Journalism is important to an open civic space, as it gives people trusted and fact-checked information and keeps governments accountable. Without press freedom, citizens cannot meaningfully exercise

their right to participate. Another example is the murder of Saudi journalist and US resident Jamal Khashoggi on October 2, 2018.⁵⁴ He was killed at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul after writing columns that were critical of the Saudi government.⁵⁵ Human rights groups continue to call for accountability and protection for journalists facing such threats. In Africa, Ethiopia has repeatedly imposed internet shutdowns during conflict, cutting off citizens’ ability to organize or report violations.

48 Roberto Di Mario, “Only 40 out of 198 countries have an open civic space: CIVICUS monitor,” Democracy Without Borders, December 16, 2024, www.democracywithoutborders.org/34525/only-40-out-of-198-countries-have-an-open-civic-space-civics-monitor/.

49 “Civic Space on a Downward Spiral,” CIVICUS, accessed August 21, 2025, findings2020.monitor.civics.org/downward-spiral.html.

50 “Overview of Shrinking Civic Space, ICPSA Toolkit, accessed August 21, 2025, www.narrativechange.org/section-2-overview-shrinking-civic-space.

51 Di Mario, “Only 40 out of 198 countries have an open civic space: CIVICUS monitor.”

52 “Protest -2025,” The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, accessed August 20, 2025, pressfreedomtracker.us/.

53 Joanne Harris, “Media freedom: journalism has crucial protective role as civic spaces threatened,” April 28, 2023, www.ibanet.org/media-freedom-civic-spaces.

54 “Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist’s death,” BBC, February 24, 2021, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399.

55 BBC, “Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist’s death.”



Parliament Hall in Tbilisi, Georgia (Credit: Interpressnews.ge)

Another way to shrink civic space is through the implementation of stricter laws. For example, foreign agent laws are increasingly used to delegitimize and isolate civil society organizations.⁵⁶ With the rise of authoritarian leaders and extensive control, civic space restrictions have begun to override free discourse. Foreign agent laws are used to discredit groups by claiming they serve the interests of another country. These laws target NGOs that get foreign funds and force them to register as “foreign agents.”⁵⁷ This limits the work of human rights defenders. Groups that do not comply face heavy fines

and penalties, which can even shut them down. Likewise, they instill fear and lead to self-censorship as a precaution. From 1994 to 2015, over 60 countries passed foreign agent laws, and 19 others set up similar rules through taxes or registries. In 2024, at least six more countries have introduced or approved such laws, with Europe and Eurasia showing the sharpest rise.⁵⁸ Russia’s long-standing foreign agent law is often cited as a model that other governments have copied. In Uganda, the 2023 NGO Act was amended to give sweeping powers to the state to suspend NGOs for “political” activities,

showing how such restrictions spread beyond Eurasia.

The parliament of Georgia passed the “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence.” The law was first proposed in 2023 but was withdrawn after mass protests.⁵⁹ The law says that any NGO getting more than 20 percent of its funding from foreign countries or international groups must register as serving a foreign power. NGOs failing to register themselves can lead to fines over USD 9,000.⁶⁰ The Ministry of Justice can also inspect organizations, ask for past information on staff pay and activities, and ignore confidentiality rules, giving the government power to shut down uncooperative NGOs. Civil society groups warned that the law resembles Russian-style repression. In Asia, India has also restricted NGOs by canceling licenses under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, affecting thousands of organizations, including those providing humanitarian aid.

The UN reported that 2024 was the deadliest year on record for aid workers (about 383 killed worldwide), with hundreds killed in Gaza since Oct 2023.⁶¹ Human rights workers and journalists all face real threats. They have faced executions, torture, beatings,

⁵⁶ Iskra Kirova, “Foreign Agent Laws in the Authoritarian Playbook,” Human Rights Watch, September 19, 2024, www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/foreign-agent-laws-authoritarian-playbook.

⁵⁷ “Spread of ‘foreign agent’ laws in Central, Eastern Europe a growing threat to civil society,” International Service for Human Rights, February 26, 2025, ishr.ch/latest-updates/spread-of-foreign-agent-laws-in-eastern-europe-pose-increasing-threats-to-civil-society/.

⁵⁸ Cameron and Nicola, “The Spreading Impact of Restrictive ‘Foreign Agent’ Laws and How to Stop Them.”

⁵⁹ Dito Matcharadze, “Majority of NGOs in Georgia refuse to register as ‘foreign agents’ under new law,” *EuroNews*, September 10, 2024, www.euronews.com/2024/09/10/majority-of-ngos-in-georgia-refuse-to-register-as-foreign-agents-under-new-law.

⁶⁰ Matcharadze, “Majority of NGOs in Georgia refuse to register as ‘foreign agents’ under new law,” *EuroNews*.

⁶¹ Kate Hodal, “At least 331 human rights defenders were murdered in 2020, report finds,” *The Guardian*, February 11, 2021, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/11/human-rights-defenders-murder-2020-report; Government of the United Kingdom, “UK recognises aid workers for life-saving work after deadliest year on record.”

arbitrary arrest, death threats, harassment, and slander.⁶² Their rights to move freely, speak, gather, and join groups have also been limited. Defenders have been falsely accused and given unfair trials. Female human rights defenders face extra risks because of gender stereotypes and social expectations about how women should behave. Women defenders are often seen as challenging family traditions, patriarchal power, and gender roles.⁶³ In Afghanistan, women protesting restrictions on education have been detained and beaten, showing how gender and civic space restrictions intersect.

Latin America is the most dangerous region for human rights defenders.⁶⁴ In 2023, 79 environmental defenders were killed in Colombia, making it the deadliest country for people protecting the environment.⁶⁵ In Venezuela, by March of 2024, at least 48 people were detained in the year.⁶⁶ Many were human rights defenders, journalists, and opposition members for alleged conspiracy. After the 2024 elections, over 1,900 political prisoners were reported.⁶⁷ Among them were 42 teenagers aged 14 to 17 who were

still in jail by November. Since 2014, there have been 17,882 politically motivated arrests. The 2024 Venezuelan elections also brought in new anti-NGO laws that silence any political opponent. Nicaragua's government has also shut down hundreds of NGOs since 2021.⁶⁸ Peru has passed laws that make it hard, even impossible, for human rights NGOs to operate. In Venezuela and Nicaragua, national

Female human rights defenders face extra risks because of gender stereotypes and social expectations about how women should behave. Women defenders are seen as challenging family traditions, patriarchal power, and gender roles.

authorities have arrested or made human rights defenders disappear.⁶⁹ Strategic Lawsuits Against Public

Participation (SLAPPs) are also used to silence the media by forcing journalists to spend large amounts of money and resources on fake or unnecessary lawsuits.⁷⁰ Protests have also become risky as they are now targeted by the government. This causes participation in these spaces to decrease.

The shrinking of civic space is one of the most serious threats facing democracy and human rights today. Around the world, governments are using laws, violence, censorship, and intimidation to silence journalists, activists, and civil society groups. From restrictions on protests to the use of foreign agent laws, these actions weaken accountability, limit participation, and put defenders at risk.

Defending civic space is not only about protecting activists. It is about safeguarding the rights of all people to speak, organize, and shape the future of their societies. Keeping civic space open is essential for democracy, justice, and lasting peace. Delegates should seek short-term solutions that protect people against these abuses. They also must work on long-term solutions that ensure a solid and lasting civic space.

62 "Challenges faced by human rights defenders," The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), accessed August 20, 2025, www.ohchr.org/es/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/challenges-faced-human-rights-defenders

63 "How women human rights defenders are under threat worldwide," UN Women, November 26, 2024, www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-women-human-rights-defenders-are-under-threat-worldwide.

64 "Latin America," Civil Rights Defenders, accessed August 20, 2025, crd.org/latin-america/.

65 "For women environmental defenders in Colombia, standing down is not an option," UN Women, October 16, 2024, www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2024/10/for-women-environmental-defenders-in-colombia-standing-down-is-not-an-option.

66 "Unprecedented Venezuela repression plunging nation into acute human rights crisis, UN Fact-Finding Mission says," The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), September 17, 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/unprecedented-venezuela-repression-plunging-nation-acute-human-rights-crisis.

67 "Venezuela: Brutal Crackdown on Protesters, Voters - Killings, Mass Arrests Following Elections," Human Rights Watch, September 4, 2024, www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/04/venezuela-brutal-crackdown-protesters-voters.

68 Panchulidze, "A New Wave of Repression on Civic Space: Democracy Support Community Failing to Respond."

69 Meyer and Welch, *Curtailing Civic Space: Tightening Restrictions on Civil Society in the Americas*.

70 "Taking action against SLAPPs, a guidebook," Sherpa, October 7, 2024, www.asso-sherpa.org/taking-action-against-slapps-a-guidebook.



Propaganda Poster Distributed in Asia, 1950 - 1955 (Credit: US National Archives and Records Administration)

Rise of Authoritarian Regimes

Only 20 percent of people now live in “free” countries. During the 21st century, there was an emergence of authoritarian regimes.⁷¹ Authoritarianism is a form of government characterized by the concentration of power in a single leader or a small group.⁷² These kinds of governments use

laws, violence, and propaganda to silence activists, journalists, and civil society groups. In the last year, 60 countries lost civic freedoms, while only 25 improved.⁷³ Today, 38 percent of people live in countries ranked “not free,” which is the highest amount since 1997.

A liberal democracy is a form of self-government that allows for the recognition of human rights and total equality under the law.

This form of government supports civic space, since their frameworks include freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. These systems allow people to speak freely, share ideas, and get involved in politics. However, authoritarian governments have increased worldwide.⁷⁴ Based on the 2025 V-Dem Democracy Report, there are 91 autocracies worldwide, which outweighs the 88 democracies.⁷⁵

Scholars call this the “third wave of autocratization.”⁷⁶ The first two waves occurred around World War II and in the 1960s. In the 20th century, fascist regimes in Europe, like those led by Hitler and Mussolini, completely shut down civic life. Communist regimes under Stalin and Mao also repressed dissent, banned independent organizations, and controlled public debate. During the Soviet Union, people were sent to prison labor camps, known as gulags.⁷⁷ People could be sent for having anti-Soviet thoughts or failing to report suspicious activity. During Mussolini’s regime, authorities arrested and deported tens of thousands of Italians to the Aeolian Islands.⁷⁸

71 Alexandra Gilliard, “Democracy in the Shadow of the Global Rise in Authoritarian Populism,” Harvard Carr-Ryan Center for Human Rights February 06, 2025, www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/carr-ryan/our-work/carr-ryan-commentary/democracy-shadow-global-rise-authoritarian-populism.

72 Michael P Auerbach, “Government Systems: Authoritarianism,” EBESCO, 2021, www.ebsco.com/research-starters/political-science/government-systems-authoritarianism.

73 Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule,” Freedom House, accessed August 20, 2025, freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule.

74 Staffan Ingemar Lindberg, “The world is becoming increasingly authoritarian - but there is hope,” University of Gothenburg, March 2, 2023, www.gu.se/en/news/the-world-is-becoming-increasingly-authoritarian-but-there-is-hope.

75 Marina Nord, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institut, March 2025), www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr_2025_lowres.pdf.

76 Vanessa Boese and Sebastian Hellmeier, “Autocratization and its consequences,” WZB, accessed August 20, 2025, www.wzb.eu/en/article/autocratization-and-its-consequences.

77 Milena Nikolova, Olga Popova, and Vladimir Otrachshenko, “Past political repression creates long-lasting mistrust,” Brookings, March 2, 2022, www.brookings.edu/articles/past-political-repression-creates-long-lasting-mistrust/.

78 Michael R. Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini’s Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), assets.cambridge.org/9780521762137/excerpt/9780521762137_excerpt.pdf.

During the Cold War, many governments in Latin America turned into authoritarian regimes and limited civic freedoms.⁷⁹ During the Cold War, Augusto Pinochet's regime in Chile (1973) suspended constitutional rights, dissolved Congress, and normalized torture and disappearances. Around 40,175 people were executed, detained and disappeared, or tortured as political prisoners.⁸⁰

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, many expected democracy to spread rapidly across the globe, but that has not quite been the case.⁸¹ Today's authoritarianism often advances not through sudden coups, but through gradual erosion of democratic institutions. This weakens checks and balances, narrows civic spaces, and fuels public distrust in democratic systems during economic or social crises.⁸²

This can be evidenced in El Salvador. President Nayib Bukele, elected in 2019, quickly consolidated power.⁸³ By 2021 his party controlled Congress and he

used that majority to remove top judges and the attorney general. Since 2022, the country has been under a "state of exception," suspending constitutional rights, and in 2025, the Assembly approved indefinite presidential re-election.⁸⁴

Additionally, since retaking power in 2021, the Taliban has imposed harsh restrictions on women, minorities, and journalists. UN reports document over 300 rights violations against media workers, widespread censorship, and the near disappearance of independent journalism.⁸⁵ In Nicaragua, over 5,000 NGOs have been forcibly closed since 2018, more than 200 journalists forced into exile, and opposition members were stripped of their nationality.⁸⁶ In Sudan, after the 2021 military coup, protests were met with live fire, internet shutdowns, and mass detentions. Over 120 protesters were killed, and civil society groups continue to face systematic harassment and bans.⁸⁷

Authoritarian governments maintain power through what

Hungarian communist leader Mátyás Rákosi called "salami tactics."⁸⁸ This is a method of gradually "slicing away" at democracy one small piece at a time. Rákosi used this to dismantle his own political opposition, rather than through sudden coups or dramatic changes. These tactics include legal restrictions, censorship, foreign agent laws, and the use of surveillance technology to gradually silence opposition without an outright ban.⁸⁹ The end goal of these salami tactics is to have a government where all aspects of life are controlled by the state without protected individual freedom and expression.

Despite these threats, parts of civil society continue to resist. In Nicaragua, activists and exiled journalists continue organizing abroad. In Sudan, youth networks mobilize despite crackdowns. Across the world, civic groups adapt—using digital tools, international solidarity, and informal activism to defend basic freedoms. The rise of authoritarianism has deeply

79 Thomas C. Field Jr., "US and the Cold War in Latin America," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, June 25, 2019, doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.642.

80 Natalia A. Ramos Miranda, "Fifty years since coup, Chile seeks answers about its disappeared," *Reuters*, August 30, 2023, www.reuters.com/world/americas/fifty-years-since-coup-chile-seeks-answers-about-its-disappeared-2023-08-30/.

81 "How is democracy doing globally, according to democracy reports?" *Demo Finland*, March 3, 2023, demofinland.org/en/democracy-accrediting-to-democracy-reports/.

82 Vanessa Williamson, "Understanding democratic decline in the United States," *Brookings*, October 17, 2023, www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-democratic-decline-in-the-united-states/.

83 Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez, "Latin America Erupts: Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (July 2021), 19–32, www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/latin-america-erupts-millennial-authoritarianism-in-el-salvador/.

84 Francesca Regalado, Annie Correal and Alan Yuhás, "El Salvador Ends Term Limits, Letting Bukele Seek Re-Election Indefinitely," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2025, Updated August 5, 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/08/01/world/americas/el-salvador-bukele-term-limits.html.

85 Lindsay Maizland, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," *Council of Foreign Relations*, August 14, 2025, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan.

86 "UN Watch invites Nicaraguan opposition leader Félix Maradiaga to address the UNHRC," *UN Watch*, March 3, 2025, unwatch.org/un-watch-invites-nicaraguan-activist-felix-maradiaga-to-address-the-unhrc/.

87 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, *Human Rights and Democracy: the 2021 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office report*, December 9, 2022, assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63cea799d3bf7f3c44bcd673/human-rights-and-democracy-2021-foreign-commonwealth-development-office-report.pdf.

88 Joe Allen, "Authoritarianism, explained," *Protect Democracy*, August 12, 2024, protectdemocracy.org/work/authoritarianism-explained/.

89 Maass, "Salami Tactics: Faits Accomplis and International Expansion in the Shadow of Major War," *Texas National Security Review*

affected civic space worldwide. Governments use laws, violence, and technology to silence people.

NGOs, journalists, protesters, and human rights defenders are under attack. Still, civic space has not

disappeared. Civil society adapts, resists, and continues to fight for freedom.

CURRENT STATUS

Ongoing Solutions

Civic space is under pressure in many parts of the world. In response, civil society groups, governments, and activists are taking action. The solutions differ based on country and governmental policy, yet there are several key areas of reform. Since around 72.4 percent of the world resides in countries that have a highly restricted civic space, there is strong urgency for collaborative solutions.⁹⁰ Some successful collaborations between governments and civil society include creating civic space commitments. Through platforms such as Open Government Partnership (OGP), they create commitments that protect freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.⁹¹ Launched in 2011, the OGP is an independent reporting mechanism that provides technical support and a forum for peer exchange to advance reforms.

One main effort is to use international frameworks for joint action. In 2020, the United Nations created the UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space. This framework established three key pillars: participation, protection, and promotion. Participation ensures an inclusive and safe civil society. Protection ensures that any civil society actors at risk from intimidation are safeguarded. Promotion ensures that civic space is promoted at the country level through facilitating debate and organization. Further, the UN Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights reiterated "public participation and civic space" as priority areas in regard to civic space protection and ensuring systematic participation.⁹²

The European Union follows a similar approach to the United Nations, through frameworks emphasizing civil protections. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights legally binds all fundamental rights to participating countries

and is relevant for when national law and EU law intersect.⁹³ The European Union also supports civil society organizations that work on human rights and democracy protections. They play a crucial role in upholding fundamental rights. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) plays a key role in monitoring and reporting all challenges to the civic space in the EU and providing relevant recommendations.⁹⁴

Other countries have taken measures to increase access to justice and support civil society organizations. In Greece and Thailand, same-sex marriage was recently legalized on February 15, 2024, and September 24, 2024, respectively.⁹⁵ These reforms were the result of years of civic engagement. Civil society organizations and grassroots movements created spaces where LGBTIQ+ citizens could share their experiences, build solidarity, and push for reform. Activists organized rallies, launched media campaigns,

90 CIVICUS, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, accessed July 21, 2025, www.civicus.org/.

91 "Recommendations by Policy Area," Open Gov Partnership, accessed August 25, 2025, www.opengovpartnership.org/open-gov-guide/.

92 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Role of the United Nations in Protecting and Promoting Civic Space," OHCHR, last modified June 29, 2025, accessed July 21, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space/role-united-nations-protecting-and-promoting-civic-space.

93 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "Civic Space," FRA, last modified 2025, accessed July 21, 2025, www.fra.europa.eu/en/cooperation/civil-society/civil-society-space.

94 European Center for Not-for-Profit Law and Philea, How to Use EU Law to Protect Civic Space: Second Edition (IssueLab, December 2023), accessed July 21, 2025, search.issuelab.org/resource/how-to-use-eu-law-to-protect-civic-space-second-edition.html.

95 Human Rights Campaign, "Marriage Equality Around the World," HRC, accessed July 21, 2025, www.hrc.org/resources/marriage-equality-around-the-world.

and mobilized public opinion, even in the face of strong opposition from conservative groups such as the Greek Orthodox Church. By keeping civic space open, these movements connected people across different sectors of society, shifted public attitudes, and ultimately translated grassroots demands into legal change.⁹⁶

To ensure full transparency and commitment to civil society protections, countries must adhere to protecting essential freedoms. Countries should develop legal frameworks to protect these media rights and ensure that any limits to the freedom of expression are legal and fair. Croatia, for example, passed reforms in 2023 to improve media ownership transparency, Mongolia followed a similar pattern with continuously drafting new laws on media freedom. The government even amended its previous laws to ensure media freedom from government control. Similarly, the United Kingdom developed guidelines on how to utilize social media as a channel to engage with citizens.⁹⁷ Digital civic space is vitally important. Estonia's e-governance model allows citizens to vote online, track legislation, and access government data securely, making it a global leader in digital civic participation.⁹⁸ Brazil's "Participa + Brasil" platform links



Citizens peacefully assemble in Melbourne (Credit: Matt Hrkac)

citizens directly with civil society projects, improving accountability.⁹⁹ Kenya has also expanded digital civic participation through eCitizen, a one-stop portal for government services, making governance more accessible to millions of citizens.¹⁰⁰ These initiatives allow the digital space to be protected and continue being used as a way to express opinions.

Protecting freedom of association is another method to allow citizens and civil society organizations to prosper. Norway and Ukraine have established associations that simplified all reporting requirements for civil society

organizations. The Philippines is committed to using civic technology to encourage citizens to participate in government projects.¹⁰¹ The United States' First Amendment protects the right of peaceful assembly and France's Constitution holds freedom of assembly as a fundamental principle. There are many other examples of legal commitments to this right, such as in the South African Bill of Rights, Article 21 of the Japanese Constitution, the Spanish Constitution, and Article 14 of the Taiwanese Constitution.

These efforts of international frameworks, legal reforms, and

⁹⁶ "Greece legalizes same-sex marriage despite church opposition," NPR, February 15, 2024, www.npr.org/2024/02/15/1231881652/greece-legalizes-same-sex-marriage.

⁹⁷ Open Government Partnership, "Actions for a Secure and Open Civic Space," Open Government Partnership, accessed July 21, 2025, www.opengovpartnership.org/actions-for-a-secure-and-open-civic-space/.

⁹⁸ Cecilia Maundu, "Kenya draws inspiration from Estonia in its journey toward e-governance," *Global Voices*, July 3, 2023, <https://globalvoices.org/2023/07/03/kenya-draws-inspiration-from-estonia-in-its-journey-toward-e-governance/>.

⁹⁹ Eduardo Veciana, "Scaling Participation in Brazil," *Democracy Technologies*, September 18, 2024, <https://democracy-technologies.org/participation/scaling-participation-in-brazil/>.

¹⁰⁰ Maundu, "Kenya draws inspiration from Estonia in its journey toward e-governance."

¹⁰¹ Open Government Partnership, "Actions for a Secure and Open Civic Space."



Peaceful protestors demonstrating in Caracas, Venezuela (Credit: durdaneta)

grassroots activism all show that civic space can be defended and expanded when governments and civil society collaborate. However, delegates must ensure that these reforms move beyond paper and are enforced in practice.

Role of Civic Spaces in Elections

Civic space plays a critical role in the functioning of democracy. It includes the freedom to express opinions, join groups or movements, and take part in peaceful protests. Civic space is often directly linked to democratic participation and fair elections. When people are

free to speak, organize, and hold leaders accountable, elections tend to be more transparent and representative.¹⁰² Elections are stress tests for civic space. In the weeks before a vote, governments that fear losing may compress liberties in ways such as disqualifying rivals, raiding newsrooms, throttling the web, and arresting organizers, while insisting the process remains “free and fair.”

A strong civic space can help improve the fairness of elections. Civil society can monitor polling, educate voters, and deter fraud, leading to more credible outcomes. In Guatemala in 2023, a peaceful protest movement helped protect election results. In many other

countries, civil society organizations work to educate about voting and increase voter turnout.¹⁰³ However, elections alone do not guarantee civic space. Some governments hold elections regularly while still restricting civil liberties, showing that democratic rituals can exist without real freedoms.

Governments who feel threatened by opposition or civil society may act to suppress it. This includes laws restricting freedom of speech, banning protests, or limiting political gatherings. There is often a rise in harassment and intimidation, mainly directed at opposition politicians, protestors, journalists, and civic organizations. People may be arrested for attending protests, as they may be accused of threatening national security or public order. These patterns undermine the credibility of democratic systems and create elections without real competition.

Another serious threat to civic space is control over the media. Independent journalists and bloggers are frequently attacked or imprisoned.¹⁰⁴ In some cases, state-run media dominates the information landscape, leaving no room for dissenting voices. Finally, the digital space is under attack. Internet shutdowns during elections have become increasingly common.¹⁰⁵ Governments cut access to mobile networks or block websites to stop the flow of

¹⁰² “Election year 2024: Effects on civic space and an opportunity to protect democracy,” ECNL, June 7, 2024, ecnl.org/news/election-year-2024-effects-civic-space-and-opportunity-protect-democracy.

¹⁰³ ECNL, “Election year 2024.”

¹⁰⁴ ECNL, “Election year 2024.”

¹⁰⁵ “Joint Statement on Internet Shutdowns and Elections,” Freedom Online Coalition, October 2023, freedomonlinecoalition.com/joint-statement-internet-shutdowns-and-elections/.

information. This directly impacts citizens' ability to organize, protest, and vote with confidence. These actions shrink civic space and weaken democracy from within.

In many countries, civic space narrows most sharply in the period leading up to elections. Venezuela illustrates this pattern clearly. There, restrictions on opposition and civil society are used as part of a broader strategy to maintain power while preserving a pretense of legitimacy through high voter turnout. The 2024 Venezuelan election demonstrated how a government can close civic space even in the midst of widespread participation. Under President Nicolás Maduro, in power since 2013, civic space has steadily eroded, especially in the months before elections. In 2023, opposition leader María Corina Machado was barred from running, continuing a long-standing practice of disqualifying serious challengers. That same year, the government introduced a bill granting the executive authority to control, monitor, and even dissolve NGOs, further silencing dissent and undermining independent voices.¹⁰⁶ That legal move served to intimidate civil society.

Due to these actions, in March 2024 Venezuela was placed on

the CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist, which tracks civic space around the world. CIVICUS downgraded Venezuela's rating to "closed," which is the worst possible level.¹⁰⁷ This was a drop from its earlier classification of "repressed," showing a sharp decline in civic freedoms just months before the election. Nearing the election, the country experienced a severe attack on political and civil freedoms. There was an increase in repression of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful demonstration.¹⁰⁸ Between July 26 and July 29, 130 arbitrary arrests were reported. There were also potential unlawful deaths linked to protest activity and security operations.¹⁰⁹

The election took place on July 28, 2024. Official results stated that Maduro won with 51.2 percent of the vote. However, it appears that opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia had actually won. The opposition gathered receipts from Venezuela's electronic voting machines, which showed that González had received a two-third majority.¹¹⁰ These findings led to widespread concerns about vote-rigging and fraud. The results served as an opening for further limitations on civil spaces.

Following the election in Venezuela, protests broke out across the country. Citizens demanded answers and greater transparency about the election results. However, these protests were met with repression, as security forces shut them down. This continued the trend of shrinking civic space.¹¹¹ Shortly afterward, a new law was passed allowing the government to expand its control over civil society organizations. This legislation gave authorities the power to monitor NGOs and potentially dissolve them.¹¹² This is part of a broader plan to silence dissent and prevent future opposition organizing.

The case of Venezuela reflects a broader global trend. Elections are increasingly held in environments where civic space is shrinking. Governments across the political spectrum are using legal tools and political power to limit civil society. For example, in the Netherlands, the November 2023 election resulted in a coalition that quickly began cutting subsidies meant to promote political participation and inclusivity.¹¹³ These cuts directly affected organizations that help engage the public in the democratic process. Another tactic is the restriction of foreign aid to domestic NGOs. Countries

¹⁰⁶ "Venezuela," Human Rights Watch, accessed August 25, 2025, www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/venezuela.

¹⁰⁷ "Venezuela added to human rights Watchlist as crackdown intensifies ahead of presidential elections," Monitor Civicus, press release, March 5, 2024, monitor.civicus.org/watchlist-march-2024/venezuela.

¹⁰⁸ "Venezuela: Maduro government's latest assault on civic space shows policy of repression remains in effect," Amnesty International, November 1, 2023, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/venezuela-maduro-assault-civic-space-repressive-policy.

¹⁰⁹ "Venezuela Presidential Election: International Organizations Call on Authorities to Guarantee Transparency," CIVICUS, July 30, 2024, www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/7208-venezuela-presidential-election-international-organizations-call-on-authorities-to-guarantee-transparency.

¹¹⁰ Alex Gonzalez, "Where Venezuela Goes From Here," *Time*, August 6, 2024, time.com/7007998/venezuela-maduro-gonzalez-election/.

¹¹¹ Gonzalez, "Where Venezuela Goes From Here."

¹¹² Carlos Lusverti, "Civil Society Organizations in Venezuela On the edge," dplf, August 6, 2025, dplf.org/en/2025/08/06/civil-society-organizations-in-venezuela-on-the-edge/.

¹¹³ ECLN, "Election year 2024."

may claim that this is about protecting national interests, but in practice, it blocks vital funding for organizations working to support human rights, democratic education, and accountability. These policies further isolate civil society and reduce public influence on government decisions.

Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations aim to address the most important environmental, social, and economic issues.¹¹⁴ The 17 goals outline a collective vision for a more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world by 2030. They cover a broad range of goals, such as eradicating hunger and poverty, guaranteeing high-quality healthcare and education, advancing gender equality, encouraging inclusive economic growth, and halting climate change. Fundamentally, the SDGs emphasize that development must

be sustainable and inclusive, leaving no one behind. They represent a dedication to international collaboration and shared responsibility. Progress toward these goals is measured through a Global Indicator Framework with 229 indicators aligned with all 17 goals and 169 targets. The UN Secretary-General also presents an official annual SDG Progress Report to the General Assembly, which shows all data for reports.

Sustainable Development Goal 16 is vital to addressing the civic space, due to its focus on institutional improvement. For instance, SDG 16 “Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions” focuses on access to justice for all and accountability at all levels of institutions.¹¹⁵ This commitment reiterates the importance of accountability and transparency to achieving the SDGs and addresses fundamental freedoms essential for civil society to play its full range of roles. SDG 16.10 emphasizes public access to information and fundamental freedoms, such as expression

and assembly. SDG 16.7 calls for an inclusive environment for representative decision making. As a result, this ensures that all voices, especially those that are marginalized, are heard in every political process. However, SDG 16 currently has little progress. Some areas are regressing, as shown in the 2nd Global Progress Report on SDG 16 Indicators.¹¹⁶ The most common barriers are corruption and human rights violations.

Civil society organizations are essential in promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making, thus advancing the goals of SDG 16. These organizations monitor government actions, advocate for human rights, and engage in policy dialogues that influence society. Yet, these organizations are currently facing challenges due to democratic backsliding. By following the SDG goals, there can be a continued commitment to encouraging global civic space.

BLOC ANALYSIS

Points of Division

While many democracies work hard to protect global civic space,

not all countries are equally willing to take such measures. The CIVICUS Monitor, run by CIVICUS (est. 1993 in South Africa), provides reliable current

data on the state of civil society conditions globally.¹¹⁷ Civic space scores are based on data about core freedoms: association, peaceful assembly, expression, and the state’s

¹¹⁴ “Goals,” United Nations, accessed August 25, 2025, sdgs.un.org/goals.

¹¹⁵ CIVICUS staff, “Protecting Civic Space Critical to SDGs Success,” CIVICUS Lens, July 12, 2024, lens.civicus.org/protecting-civic-space-critical-to-sdgs-success/.

¹¹⁶ *2nd Global Progress Report on SDG 16 Indicators*, UNODC: July 2024), www.undp.org/publications/2nd-global-progress-report-sdg-16-indicators.

¹¹⁷ “Monitor,” CIVICUS, accessed August 25, 2025, monitor.civicus.org/.

duty to protect them. Based on the latest CIVICUS Monitor data, which analyzed over 2,500 cases worldwide, around 72.4 percent of the global population resides in a country with a highly restrictive civic space and only 40 out of 198 countries and territories have open civic space ratings.¹¹⁸ You can see country scores at this link: <https://monitor.civicus.org/>.

There is a sharp contrast between the global situation and the protections that civic space should have. Measuring civic space openness, along with other key national policies, is an important way to understand different civic space blocs. These blocs will be useful for delegates to fully grasp the complexity of protecting civic space. However, it is still necessary for all countries to work together to improve these protections worldwide.

Civic Space Defenders

Countries in this bloc are states that actively work to uphold, expand, and defend civic freedoms, both domestically and globally.¹¹⁹ As a result, these states are fostering

an environment that encourages individual citizen engagement and participation, often even showing signs of a democracy-oriented government. A country under this bloc would score above an 80 on the CIVICUS Monitor.¹²⁰ In committee, Civic Space Defenders would likely push for strong international commitments to protect freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. They may advocate for independent monitoring mechanisms, funding initiatives for NGOs, digital protections for activists, or international partnerships that strengthen transparency and accountability.

Common characteristics include a democratic government, high economic development, and a comprehensive welfare system. Several defender countries fall under Nordic leadership, with Norway, for example, scoring a 97 out of 100 in 2024.¹²¹ This is due to Norway's and other Nordic countries' strong civic space sectors. Due to the high level of participation in public life, Norwegians have high trust in their government.¹²² Norway supports civil society organizations through programs such as the

Norway Grants, which fund NGOs and help strengthen democratic values and protect civic life. In Western Europe, with countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Sweden, there are similar patterns. Such countries have high scores on the CIVICUS Monitor Data along with strong legal frameworks that guarantee civil protections. Additionally, civil society organizations play an essential role in society and hold governments accountable during policy-making measures.¹²³ Further, within the European Union, there is a very strong rule of law that ensures a protected civic space.¹²⁴ The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights guarantees freedom of expression, assembly, and association, suggesting that European countries would align with this bloc. Finally, Canada also scored very highly on the CIVICUS measure, along with Australia and New Zealand. In 2024, Japan, Jamaica, Slovenia, and Trinidad and Tobago all transitioned into the "open" category in the CIVICUS measures, suggesting that civic space change is feasible.¹²⁵

In committee, these countries would likely push for strong

118 "2024 Civicus Monitor Finds Over 70 Percent of World's Population Lives in Highly Restricted Countries; Nearly 10 Percent of Civic-Space Violations Related to Palestine," Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, December 9, 2024, www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/2024-civics-monitor-finds-over-70-percent-of-worlds-population-lives-in-highly-restricted-countries-nearly-10-percent-of-civic-space-violations-related-to-palestine/.

119 The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space: Strengthening Alignment with International Standards and Guidance (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022), doi:10.1787/d234e975-en.

120 "Americas," CIVICUS, accessed August 25, 2025, monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/americas/.

121 Statista, "Civic Space Worldwide: Countries with the Highest Restrictions," Statista, 2024, accessed July 22, 2025, www.statista.com/statistics/1373234/civic-space-worldwide-countries-highest/.

122 OECD, Government at a Glance 2023: Country Note: Norway (OECD Publishing, 2023), accessed July 22, 2025, www.oecd.org/en/publications/government-at-a-glance-2023_c4200b14-en/norway_2d302411-en.html.

123 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "Civil Society Space," FRA – Fundamental Rights Agency, last modified 2025, accessed July 22, 2025, www.fra.europa.eu/en/cooperation/civil-society/civil-society-space.

124 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "Civil Society Space," FRA – Fundamental Rights Agency, last modified 2025, accessed July 22, 2025, www.fra.europa.eu/en/cooperation/civil-society/civil-society-space.

125 CIVICUS Monitor, "In Numbers," Global Findings 2024, CIVICUS Monitor, accessed July 22, 2025, monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/innumbers/.

language defending freedoms and encourage international monitoring mechanisms. They would likely draft or co-sponsor resolutions that emphasize transparency, accountability, and human rights protections.

Civic Space Restrictors

While several countries have strong civic space protections into their legal frameworks, others have several threats against liberty protections. This bloc consists of countries that have passed legislation, policies, or followed practices that limit civic freedoms and repress civil society.¹²⁶ For instance, several countries around the globe have foreign agent laws that affect 44 percent of countries, and even mass liquidation of NGOs or excessive taxation as other repressive measures.

Further, actions such as internet shutdowns and mass surveillance are characteristics of countries in this bloc. Based on the CIVICUS Monitor, countries between the score one to 60 would fall under this bloc. Some examples include countries that follow an authoritarian model, like Russia, China, Venezuela, or Belarus. Russia, for example, followed the foreign agent law model, which dissolved several civil society

organizations. China has several digital surveillance measures that suppress any liberty dissent.¹²⁷ Other countries in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have similar CIVICUS scores due to the role of government in restricting civic space access. Thus, countries in this bloc would be against having free civic space access and have existing measures that combat open civic space usage.

In committee, these states would likely resist international oversight, argue that civic space is a domestic issue, and frame restrictions as necessary for stability, sovereignty, or security purposes. They might support language on voluntary reporting, information-sharing, or regional dialogue, but reject clauses that call for sanctions or direct oversight of their domestic affairs. They may try to water down resolutions, remove references to NGOs, or insert clauses protecting state control over civic activity. Some might abstain or vote against strong resolutions, but they would still argue to defend their positions.

Mixed Stances on Civic Space

Countries with mixed stances on civic space have both restrictive and supportive measures toward the civic space. These states would

often score between 61 to 80 on the CIVICUS Monitor and are considered “narrowed” countries. For example, countries such as India, Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia fall under this category due to their mixed governmental responses. For example, through FCRA amendments, India has targeted several thousand NGOs that previously defended human rights and minority issues.¹²⁸

While Indonesia tolerates public protests and advocacy, there are still increasing restrictions on freedom of assembly near critical elections. “Narrowed” countries, also like the US, South Korea, or Argentina have that description because civic rights are legally protected but sometimes undermined in practice, usually during protests or in security contexts.

Within Europe, Hungary and Poland would fall under this bloc. Hungary has faced criticism for its new foreign influence law, which many say goes against civil society guidelines. Still, as a member of the European Union, Hungary is part of frameworks that support civic space and democratic participation.¹²⁹ Also, in countries such as Georgia, there are often mass protests that are rarely interfered with, but the country simultaneously has several foreign agent laws. This renders it

126 Siân Herbert, Restricting Space for Civil Society: Helpdesk Report, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), August 2015, accessed July 22, 2025, gsdrc.org/publications/restricting-space-for-civil-society/.

127 Rana Siu Inboden, “China at the UN: Choking Civil Society,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (July 2021): 124–35, accessed July 22, 2025, www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/china-at-the-un-choking-civil-society/.

128 International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, “Development Impacts of Civic Space Restrictions,” ICNL, January 2025, accessed July 22, 2025, www.icnl.org/post/report/development-impacts-of-civic-space-restrictions.

129 European Civic Forum, Civic Space Report 2024 (Brussels: European Civic Forum, May 23, 2024), accessed July 22, 2025, civicforum.eu/civic-space-report-2024.

a “mixed” country.¹³⁰ Countries in this bloc should complete an in-depth understanding of government reactions to protests and other civic engagement actions.

In committee, these countries may support resolutions if the language is moderate but would

push back against overly strong monitoring or foreign involvement. This bloc might propose compromising language, such as acknowledging the importance of civic freedoms while emphasizing each country’s national context. They may support capacity-

building programs, technical assistance for civic engagement, or gradual reforms instead of sweeping international monitoring systems. Diplomatically, they are key to building consensus between defenders and restrictors.

COMMITTEE MISSION

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) was created in 1993 by General Assembly resolution 48/141 to promote and protect all human rights worldwide. The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) was created on March 15, 2006 by the UN General Assembly resolution 60/251 to protect and support human rights for all peoples.¹³¹ This resolution established that the UN Human Rights is mandated to promote and protect all human rights for all.¹³² In this committee, solutions can include resolutions, making recommendations to states, and mechanisms like working groups. The Council’s limitations include a lack of enforcement power and voluntary compliance.

The Council has many roles, including but not limited to coordinating UN human rights education programs, engaging with

governments for these protections, and removing barriers that lead to rights being violated.¹³³ The Human Rights Council (HRC) was established to replace the former Commission on Human Rights, which had been set up in 1946 by ECOSOC. The OHCHR serves as the HRC’s secretariat, providing substantive support, organizing sessions, and preparing reports for the Council.

Early projects of UNHRC included establishing a Universal Periodic Review, with the first cycle beginning in 2008. This allows for state-driven peer-review mechanisms that would allow UN member states to review each country’s human rights situations.¹³⁴ During the committee, delegates will work together to study the current state of civic space. They will also identify key challenges that lead to any violations. Delegates should develop strategies that

ensure all individuals and civil society actors can engage in any social and political processes without fear of violence.

Delegates should write draft resolutions that reflect both their own country’s positions and a shared goal to protect human rights. Delegates need to find a common ground in committee, even if their countries have different levels of civic space. The ultimate goal of this committee is to ensure that every individual has the opportunity and freedom to express their opinions and engage in social participation without fear of retaliation.

130 CIVICUS, “Foreign Agents Laws Threaten Civil Society,” CIVICUS LENS, published circa February 2024, accessed July 22, 2025, lens.civicus.org/foreign-agents-laws-threaten-civil-society/.

131 “Mandate of UN Human Rights,” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - OHCHR, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/mandate-un-human-rights.

132 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Mandate of UN Human Rights.”

133 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Mandate of UN Human Rights.”

134 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Universal Periodic Review,” *OHCHR*, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-home.



The Human Right of Freedom of Religion

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, is often referred to as religious freedom or as freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). It is a crucial and universal human right, stated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and many other international human rights treaties.¹ It protects all people, including those who hold religious and non-religious beliefs, as well as those who choose not to have any belief at all.²

Although religious freedom had been talked about for centuries, it was not legally recognized until modern times.³ Years of violence, including genocides, highlighted the importance of the issue in

discussions. The Holocaust, for example, showed the dangers of ignoring religious persecution. Therefore, after World War II, the United Nations officially began to protect these rights.⁴ These documents, such as the UDHR, discuss the right to believe, practice, and express one's religion freely without fear of discrimination or forced conversion.⁵ Most importantly, they discuss how states are responsible for protecting these rights.

Over 150 countries today include religious freedom in their constitutions.⁶ Many have also chosen to ratify treaties protecting religious freedom. However, according to the Pew Forum, by mid 2009 only 53 of these countries

fully respected it.⁷ More than half of these governments or non-state actors continue to restrict and terrorize persons practicing a religion. These actions can also block other rights, such as access to education.

Many individuals belonging to religious or belief communities experience daily discrimination on the basis of their faith or convictions. They face restrictions in exercising their civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights. In some cases, they are denied equal access to public education, healthcare, or government positions. Others are even subjected to arbitrary arrest or killed because of religious affiliation.⁸

TOPIC BACKGROUND

Protecting Religious Rights

Before World War II, an individual's human rights were not

a matter of international law. There was no protection for those whose human rights were abused by their own government.⁹ Had a person's right been abused in a foreign country, only then would their

home country step in, mostly to protect its reputation or interest.¹⁰ Religious freedom, though, had been advocated for as early as the second century.¹¹ Notable groups included St. Justin Martyr and later

¹ "International standards," United Nations Human rights Office of the High Commissioner, Accessed July 27, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/international-standards.

² "Freedom of religion," United Nations Human Right Office of the High Commissioner, accessed July 27, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/topic/freedom-religion.

³ Ann Marie B Bahr, "United Nations Votes to Protect Freedom of Religion and Belief", EBSCO, accessed July 27, 2025, www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/united-nations-votes-protect-freedom-religion-and-belief.

⁴ Bahr, "United Nations Votes to Protect Freedom of Religion and Belief."

⁵ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nation, accessed July 27, 2025, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

⁶ *Global Restrictions on Religion*, (Washington D.C: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, December 2009), www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2009/12/restrictions-fullreport1-1.pdf.

⁷ *Global Restrictions on Religion*, 8.

⁸ "Combating discrimination based on religion or belief," United Nations Human rights Office of the High Commissioner, accessed July 27, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/combating-discrimination-based-religion-or-belief.

⁹ Bahr, "Freedom of Religion,"

¹⁰ Bahr, "Freedom of Religion,"

¹¹ Margaret Nornberg, "St. Justin: Philosopher, Apologist, and Martyr," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed August 1, 2025, www.usccb.org/committees/religious-liberty/st-justin-philosopher-apologist-and-martyr ; John Stonestreet and Glenn Sunshine, "Combating discrimination based on religion or belief," January 19, 2024, www.breakpoint.org/marsilius-of-padua-on-the-relationship-of-church-and-state/.



Eleanor Roosevelt holding poster of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Credit: FDR Presidential Library & Museum)

Marsilius of Padua. Even though this subject had been of concern for centuries, it was not legally protected until modern history.

Religious persecutions and genocides often occurred to gain power and control during war. Among the first genocides of the 20th century, the Armenian genocide, targeted Armenian Christians living in the Ottoman Empire.¹² The empire made Muslim Turks the dominant group in central and eastern Anatolia by reducing the number of Armenians there. In doing so, they ensured that Armenians would not join

the country's enemies during World War I.¹³ Without a major world outcry and other religious persecutions, like those against the Baha'is in Iran, then future crimes like the Holocaust happened.

After WWII, the Nuremberg Trials began on November 20, 1945.¹⁴ The trials were established by the US, the UK, France, and the Soviet Union. The International Military Tribunal (IMT) indicted 24 war criminals and seven Nazi organizations on charges of crimes against peace, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and conspiracy.¹⁵ The Nuremberg Trials concluded

with 19 convictions, three acquittals, and sentences ranging from prison terms to 12 death penalties. This made human rights a global concern, not just a national one.

Following this, the UN began to establish a set of international laws that can protect fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion. The United Nations General Assembly introduced the UDHR.¹⁶ They hoped to never let the horrors and human suffering of that war happen again.¹⁷ Over 50 member states helped in writing the final draft. By December of 1948, the declaration was published and translated into over 500 languages.¹⁸

Inspired by this, over 70 other human rights treaties have been applied today around the world and at local levels.¹⁹ One of these treaties was the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979. This convention provides a comprehensive, legally binding framework to protect women's rights worldwide. Its preamble mentions how the UDHR affirms that everyone should have the same rights and freedoms, no matter their sex. Further, it holds governments accountable for eliminating gender-based

12 "The Armenian Genocide (1915-16): Overview," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed August 1, 2025, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-armenian-genocide-1915-16-overview.

13 Holocaust Encyclopedia, "The Armenian Genocide (1915-16): Overview."

14 Holocaust Encyclopedia, "The Armenian Genocide (1915-16): Overview."

15 "Bahr, "United Nations Votes to Protect Freedom of Religion and Belief."

16 United Nations, *History of the Declaration*, (United Nations, 2024), www.un.org/en/about-us/udhr/history-of-the-declaration.

17 United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, (United Nations, 1948), www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

18 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

19 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

discrimination and promoting equality through their policies.²⁰ The countries who chose to follow this treaty have shown improvement in issues regarding property rights, inheritance, violence, etc.²¹

There are 30 articles within the UDHR that set a common standard of living for people and countries. Governments are encouraged to work on steps to promote these universal rights.²² Article 18 was the first major document to address religious freedom.²³ Article 18 of the UDHR states: *“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes the 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.”*²⁴ At its time, the UDHR was very progressive in pushing the idea that believers of all religions and secular beliefs should be able to live peacefully with their rights and liberties guaranteed and respected. The UN and any international laws do not require the separation of church and state, but they do proclaim that a state

should not force any national or state religion on individuals who do not choose to practice that religion.²⁵

Muslim states, such as Saudi Arabia, abstained from voting for this declaration because it did not align with Sharia law. Sharia is based on teachings from the Quran, which Muslims use as a set of directions to live a righteous life. Though it is not a codified legal system, Muslim countries use it as a foundation of their legal systems.²⁶ Saudi Arabia claimed that the declaration violated Sharia law, particularly Article 18.²⁷ Instead, an alternative document was proposed by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to better grant their people freedom and the right to a dignified life in accordance with the Islamic-Sharia law.²⁸ This proposal was referred to as the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam. After its adoption in 1990, human rights activists in the West and some in the Muslim world claimed that the declaration conflicted with the UDHR. For example, Article 10 states that *“Islam is the religion of unspoiled*

nature. It is prohibited to exercise any form of compulsion on man or to exploit his poverty or ignorance in order to convert him to another religion or to atheism.”

This phrasing protects individuals from being pressured away from Islam, but it does not guarantee the freedom to leave Islam, convert to another religion, or reject religion altogether. The document also failed to address issues related to family values, freedom of speech, political participation, and the rights of many non-Muslims.²⁹ Encouragingly, the Cairo Declaration was revised in 2020 (sometimes referred to as the 2021 version), with language that tries to align more closely with international human rights standards, including stronger references to equality and women’s rights. However, critics argue that it still leaves important gaps, especially on freedom of expression, conversion, and the rights of religious minorities.

In 1966, at the heart of the Cold War, the UN General Assembly adopted “the international covenants,” which are the

20 “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York,” United Nations Human rights Office of the High Commissioner, accessed August 1, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women

21 “Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw.

22 United Nation, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

23 United Nation General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, A/RES/217, (December 8, 1948), [docs.un.org/en/A/RES/217\(III\)](http://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/217(III)).

24 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

25 United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 70: 30 Articles on 30 Articles - Article 18*, (November 27, 2018), www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2018/11/universal-declaration-human-rights-70-30-articles-30-articles-article-18.

26 Kali Robinson, “Understanding Sharia: The Intersection of Islam and the Law,” Council Foreign Relations, accessed August 1, 2025, www.cfr.org/background/understanding-sharia-intersection-islam-and-law.

27 Andrew Glass, “United Nations adopts Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Dec. 10, 1948,” Politico, December 10, 2015, www.politico.com/story/2015/12/united-nations-adopts-universal-declaration-of-human-rights-dec-10-1948-216489.

28 Glass, “United Nations adopts Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Dec. 10, 1948.”

29 Turan Kayaoglu, “The Organization of Islamic Cooperation’s declaration on human rights: Promises and pitfalls,” September 28, 2020, www.brookings.edu/articles/the-organization-of-islamic-cooperations-declaration-on-human-rights-promises-and-pitfalls/.



The Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Declaration on Human Rights Summit, 2020 (Credit: Brookings Doha Center)

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The two covenants, together with the UDHR, form the International Bill of Rights.³⁰ While the two covenants share many similarities with the UDHR, one thing that distinguishes these treaties is that they are legally binding to states who choose to abide by them.³¹

In other words, governments that commit to these covenants through ratification are legally

obligated to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights they contain.³²

The United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) is the body of independent experts who monitor the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by its state parties.³³ Some ways they verify compliance can be through progress reports submitted by or on countries or complaints by individuals who claim their rights were violated.

Generally, if a country fails to deal with human rights violations

within its government, people can report their issues to human rights organizations. These organizations will then intervene and urge the country to solve these issues. In more serious situations, a country could also be tried in court for breaking these international laws.³⁴ Through the covenants, countries have changed their laws and policies, as well as people's lives. Argentina was led to compensate an Indigenous girl who had been brutally raped. A court also stopped evicting informal Roma settlements in Serbia. Kyrgyzstan introduced habeas corpus, or the legal right that protects people from being held in jail or prison without a good reason, in its criminal code.³⁵

This committee will focus on Articles 18, 20, 24, and 27 from the ICCPR and Articles 2 and 13 from the ICESCR, as they draw more attention to religious practices.³⁶ All together, they state that everyone has the right to choose, practice, and express their religion or beliefs, alone or with others, in private or public settings (ICCPR Art. 18, 27, ICESCR Art. 2). No one should be forced to convert religions or beliefs unless they choose to, and they should have absolute freedom to do so (ICCPR Art. 18). Parents or guardians have the right to raise and educate their children

30 United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner, *International Bill of Human Rights A brief history, and the two International Covenants*, www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights/international-bill-human-rights.

31 *The Foundation of International Human Rights Law*.

32 *International Bill of Human Rights A brief history, and the two International Covenants*.

33 "About The Covenants," accessed August 1, 2025, 2covenants.ohchr.org/About-The-Covenants.html

34 United Nations Peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet, *Uphold International Law*, www.un.org/en/our-work/uphold-international-law.

35 "About The Covenant."

36 United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, (December 16, 1966), General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI), www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights.

according to their religion and beliefs (ICCPR Art. 18, ICESCR Art. 13). National, racial, or religious hate speech is prohibited by the law when it leads to discrimination, violence, or hostility (ICCPR Art. 20). All children must be protected by these laws without discrimination on religion, race, sex, or cultural background. (ICCPR Art. 24, ICESCR Art. 13). Religious, ethnic, and language minorities have the right to practice their culture, speak their language, and follow their religion freely as a community (ICCPR Art. 27).

Religion and Governments

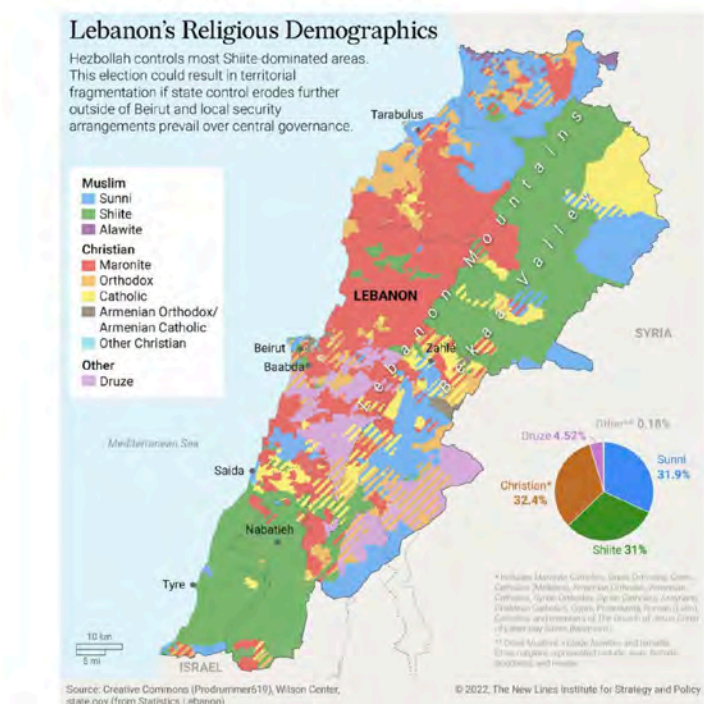
The UNHRC does not restrict a state from having its official religion unless it would restrain people who choose not to follow it.³⁷ The ICCPR addresses state religions and suggests that even if a country has an official religion or if the majority of its population follows one religion, this should not impact or impair those who do not follow that religion.³⁸ The state should never discriminate by giving them more accessibility to work in government, giving some economic privileges, or imposing restrictions on those practicing other faiths.³⁹

These three rules continue to be broken in parts of the world.⁴⁰

In India, after many attempts to create a constitution that could equally represent Muslims and Hindus, it ultimately led to the partition of India and Pakistan.⁴¹ The partition solved few problems and created new conflicts. 15 million people had to cross new frontiers to live in a place their religion aligned with. During this time, between 200,000 to one million people were estimated to have been killed or died of disease.⁴²

Today, there are still 200 million Muslims in India who face rights violations, discrimination, and reduced political authority under the current prime minister and the Bharatiya Janata Party.⁴³

Many countries struggle with problems about who gets represented in government. In Lebanon, this is especially complicated. Most of the members in parliament are men, and the country is divided into many different religious groups, or sects. Lebanon's parliament is set up so



Lebanon's religious demographic across different regions of the country.
(Credit: Prodrummer619)

37 UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency, *CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)*, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, (July 30, 1993), www.refworld.org/legal/general/hrc/1993/en/13375.

38 United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner, *International standards Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/international-standards#18.

39 *CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)*.

40 *CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)*.

41 Laura Dudley Jenkins, "Diversity and the Constitution in India: What is Religious freedom?," (October 24, 2009), drakelawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/irvol57-4_jenkins-9-0.pdf.

42 "Partition: Why was British India divided 75 years ago?" BBC, accessed August 1, 2025, www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-62467438.

43 Sheikh Saaliq and Krutika Pathi, "India's parliament sees fewer Muslims as the strength of Modi's party grows," www.pbs.org/newshour/world/indias-parliament-sees-fewer-muslims-as-the-strength-of-modis-party-grows

that half the seats go to Muslims and half to Christians.⁴⁴ But within those two groups, there are smaller sects that compete for power, which often causes conflict.

Even countries like France, which define themselves as a strongly secular state or “*Laïcité*,” face criticisms over their handling of religions.⁴⁵ The French Constitution, deeply influenced by *Laïcité*, restricts public displays of religious practices and demonstrations.⁴⁶ A consequence of this doctrine has been the ban on wearing hijabs in public, as well as any religious symbols, such as a cross or the star of David in public schools.⁴⁷

Such extreme measures can affect people’s right to practice their faith. Practicing a religion can be both inward and outward. The International Bill of Human Rights explicitly says that people should be able to practice and follow their beliefs as long as they do not pose a danger to the public.⁴⁸ For example, in the United Kingdom, the coronation ceremony includes Christian rituals, such as prayers and blessings by the Archbishop of Canterbury. These are public religious ceremonies, but they do not harm the wider public. Similarly, in Senegal, which is a

secular country, national events often include Islamic prayers while still respecting the rights of Christians and other minorities. These rituals are symbolic and inclusive, showing that public expressions of religion can exist without restricting anyone else’s freedom.

Pluralistic societies are often open to free exercise of religion. In their constitutions, they are pluralistic in both culture and religion.⁴⁹ This often includes giving religious institutions the ability to operate openly, run schools or charities, and take part in public life. While this kind of openness can be a strength, as it helps people feel included and valued, it also creates challenges. When many religions and cultures share the same political system, disagreements may arise over how much influence each group should have. Some groups may feel underrepresented or overshadowed by larger or more dominant communities. Others may argue that public resources or laws favor one religion over another. Thus, pluralism can lead to debates not only about freedom of belief but also about fairness and equality in representation.

On the other hand, some countries give one religion an

official place in their government. These are sometimes called religion-sponsored states. In these places, the government may give money to certain religious groups, promote their beliefs, or even make laws based on religious rules. For example, some countries have blasphemy laws, which punish people if they insult or speak against the main religion.⁵⁰ In some religion-sponsored states, leaders are required to belong to the main religion, and judges or officials must make decisions that follow religious law. Iran is one example. Since 1979, Iran’s government has been based on Islamic law, known as Sharia. Judges there must follow Sharia when making legal decisions. In the 1980s, punishments such as public lashings or even execution were added for crimes like drinking alcohol or adultery.⁵¹

Other countries also connect religion closely to their laws. In Greece, for example, Orthodox Christianity has historically held a privileged position, and laws once limited conversions away from the faith. Courts have since reviewed and adjusted many of these restrictions. This system can cause problems for people who belong to minority religions. They may find it harder to practice their faith, and the government may not treat all

44 Lina Khatib and Jon Wallace, “Lebanon’s politics and politicians,” Chatham House, accessed August 1, 2025, www.chathamhouse.org/2021/08/lebanons-politics.

45 “Secular Countries 2025,” World Population Review, accessed August 1, 2025, worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/secular-countries.

46 *Religion State Relations*, (International IDEA, September 2014), 4, peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2022/07/ideareligionstaterelationsen2014_0.pdf.

47 *French full-body veil ban, violated women’s freedom of religion: UN Human Rights Committee*, (UN News Global perspective Human stories, October 23, 2018), news.un.org/en/story/2018/10/1023872.

48 *International Bill of Human Rights A brief history, and the two International Covenants*.

49 *French full-body veil ban, violated women’s freedom of religion: UN Human Rights Committee*, 5.

50 *French full-body veil ban, violated women’s freedom of religion: UN Human Rights Committee*, 6.

51 Peter William Avery and Janet Afary, “Justice of Iran,” Britannica, www.britannica.com/place/Iran/Justice.

groups equally. By contrast, some countries try to treat all religions fairly. Canada, for example, does not have an official state religion. Its constitution guarantees freedom of religion, meaning people can practice, or not practice, any faith. While Christian holidays are national holidays, followers of other religions can also take time off to celebrate events like Eid, Diwali, or Passover.⁵² Courts have also protected religious minorities, such as Sikh students who wanted to wear a ceremonial dagger, the kirpan, in school.⁵³ This shows how a government can stay neutral while still protecting everyone's right to believe and practice freely.

Social Hostilities Toward Religion

Social hostilities are acts of religious violence or abuse done by people, groups, or organizations.⁵⁴ Such actions include armed conflicts, terrorism, and mob violence. It can also include harassment over religious dress codes.⁵⁵ These actions often lead to serious harm for members of a religion or belief. In one decade, the number of countries hit by religion-related terrorism has quadrupled. It has gone from eight



Jewher Ilham accepts a prize on behalf of her jailed father, Ilham Tohti, a Uyghur scholar fighting for the rights of China's Muslims. (Credit: Edelseider)

countries in 2007 to 32 in 2017.⁵⁶ Some examples include attacks against civilians by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and Boko Haram in Nigeria. In 2018, 13 countries reported having wars or armed conflicts related to religion. Many people in these countries still suffer to this day. Countries most affected include Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, India, Iraq, Libya, the Philippines, and Sudan.

Over one million people have been killed or forced to le

ave their homes in recent years.⁵⁷ Religious violence is also more common during conflict than peacetime.⁵⁸ Any religion-related violence is a serious concern to the UN and its entities. Religious groups continue to face targeted attacks, such as violence against Muslims in the Central African Republic, the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, and the mass imprisonment of Uyghur Muslims in China.⁵⁹ Since

⁵² *Religion State Relations*, 7.

⁵³ Al Jazeera English, "Canada allows Sikh knives in school," March 3, 2006, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2006/3/3/canada-allows-sikh-knives-in-school>

⁵⁴ Azar Khalil, "Causes of Terrorism," *IU South Bend Undergraduate Research Journal* 6 (January 2003): 1–8. scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/iusburj/article/view/19747.

⁵⁵ Khalil, "Causes of Terrorism," 1–8

⁵⁶ Pew Research Center, *Trends in Global Restrictions on Religion*, (June 23, 2016), www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/06/23/trends-in-global-restrictions-on-religion/.

⁵⁷ *Trends in Global Restrictions on Religion*.

⁵⁸ Minority Rights Group International, *Peoples under Threat 2018*, minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/peoples-under-threat-briefing-2018.pdf.

⁵⁹ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 75/385, Elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance: comprehensive implementation of and follow-up to the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, A/75/385, (October 12, 2020),

2009, the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life has published a series of reports on how much governments limit religion or beliefs. Their reports cover over 190 countries and go up to 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic began. They look at both government limits and social violence.⁶⁰ The Center posits that there are six main ways in which religious conflicts happen and cross borders. These are tensions about the religion of immigrants and refugees in foreign countries; religious extremism spreading from one country to another; governments trying to control religious matters outside their own borders; terrorist groups or individuals carrying out attacks in the name of religion, sometimes with support from abroad; people in one country reacting strongly to religious events that happened in another country; religion-related wars or armed conflicts that draw in multiple countries.⁶¹

Another way in which social hostilities have been demonstrated is through terrorism. Acts of terrorism usually have two main goals: to get more supporters and to scare or pressure enemies.⁶²

Most terrorist attacks try to achieve both. They try to change a state's behavior and also grow their groups or convince more people to support their cause. Analysis of terrorists suggests that they do not always have extreme religious devotion.⁶³ Nevertheless, the attacks often target religious minorities. Instead, perpetrators may carry out an attack because they need to escape a sense

A common terrorist act related to religion is holding civilians hostage until they convert to the faith that a group favors. Detention camps and other methods are used to terrorize minority ethnic groups within some states.

of alienation or prejudice. They find friendship, kinship, and a sense of belonging in the terrorist cells that they join.

When people live in fear or conflict, some will be drawn to terrorist groups. These groups can be demonstrative, destructive, or suicidal.⁶⁴ Demonstrative terrorism mainly focuses on attention. Terrorists use this type to make their case to the world. Nowadays, they may use tools such as social media. They want to recruit new members, get sympathy from people who share their struggles, and hopefully then get other countries to pressure their perceived enemies to change.⁶⁵ Airline hijacking, hostage-taking, or setting off bombs after sending warnings are methods used to gain attention. Indian Airlines Flight 814, for instance, was hijacked by five Pakistani members of the Harkat-ul-Ansar terrorist group in December 1999.⁶⁶ This hijack lasted for a week, thus forcing more media coverage until their desires were met, which was the release of three Muslim leaders who had been arrested in India.⁶⁷

Destructive terrorism is more aggressive. The goal is to hurt civilians and infrastructure to force enemies to give in.⁶⁸ They are willing to lose sympathy because they believe their cause is worth

docs.un.org/en/A/75/385. ; Rachel Vandenbrink, *China: The International Community is Failing Xinjiang's Uyghurs*, (United States Institute of peace December 30, 2020), www.usip.org/publications/2020/12/china-international-community-failing-xinjiangs-uyghurs.
60 *Trends in Global Restrictions on Religion*.

61 Brian J. Grim, *Cross-National Influences on Social Hostilities Involving Religion and Government restrictions on Religion*, (Taylor and Francis Online 2013), Vol 11, Issue 3 pp 3-9, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15570274.2013.829988.

62 Khalil, "Causes of Terrorism," 5

63 John T. Picarelli, *The Future of Terrorism*, Issue No. 264, www.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh241/files/media/document/228387.pdf.

64 Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *The American Political Science Review* vol. 97, no. 3 (2003): 343, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3117613>.

65 Robert A Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (August 2003): 345, www.jstor.org/stable/3117613?seq=3 pp 345

66 Transboundary Crisis Management, "Hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814," cdm.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Indian_Airlines_Hijacking_ExecSummary.pdf.

67 Ressler, Don. "Al-Qaida and the Pakistani Harakat Movement: Reflections and Questions about the Pre-2001 Period." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): 38–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26295955>.

68 Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," 345.

it.⁶⁹ Boko Haram, which roughly translates to “Western education is a sin,” has killed tens of thousands of people in Nigeria and displaced more than two million others. This group began as a protest against government corruption, yet over time, the group became extremist and violent. It started attacking schools, churches, and mosques.⁷⁰ The UN’s Security Council recalled that since 2009, Boko Haram attacks have caused “large-scale and devastating loss of life and represent a threat to the stability and peace of West and Central Africa.” Over 74,000 Nigerians were displaced into Cameroon, 20,000 immigrated to Chad, and thousands more were internally displaced.⁷¹ A common terrorist act related to religion is holding civilians hostage until they convert to the faith that a group favors. Detention camps and other methods are used to terrorize minority ethnic groups within some states.

Suicidal terrorism is an extreme kind of terrorism. In this type, the attacker plans to die during the attack. They may use car bombs, explosive vests, or even crash planes. The goal is usually to kill as many people as possible and cause the most fear. These attacks usually

get a lot of attention and can scare people more than other types of attacks. However, because so many innocent people are hurt or killed, the public often turns against the terrorist group. Even people from the same community as the attackers may start to disagree. Some may call the attackers heroes, while others think the actions are too extreme and wrong. Terrorism is about spreading fear to reach a goal, but suicidal terrorism shows using extreme violence, even at the cost of losing support. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka carried out suicide attacks as part of their fight for independence.⁷² These attacks caused fear, but they also led many people to reject the group’s methods.

UN Intervention to Aid Freedom of Religion and Belief

To ensure that countries respect the right to freedom of religion and belief, the UNHRC designated a Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The rapporteur must monitor and report any obstacles that prevent civilians from

practicing their religion or belief, as well as provide potential solutions to help fix these problems.⁷³ Country visits are also necessary for the rapporteur to get an in-depth understanding of FoRB in specific countries. Every year, they visit up to two countries and present their findings to the press as well as their annual report.⁷⁴

The current rapporteur is Nazila Ghanea.⁷⁵ She says that even though the UN made strong statements in 1948 through the UDHR and 1981 with the Declaration on Ending Religious Intolerance, the world still struggles with protecting freedom of belief. She shares that after the adoption of the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, and after the proclamation of the UDHR, the landscape of FoRB in the world remains challenging.

The Special Rapporteur also points out that these issues increase during times of war and armed conflicts.⁷⁶ Ghanea also talks about people who lose their rights from birth. This happens when governments refuse to recognize certain beliefs or religious groups, especially if they are small in size,

69 John T. Picarelli, *The Future of Terrorism* (NIJ Journal 2009), www.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh241/files/media/document/228387.pdf

70 Madiha Afzal, *From “Western education is forbidden” to the world’s deadliest terrorist group: education and Boko Haram in Nigeria* (Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2020) www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FP_20200507_nigeria_boko_haram_afzal.pdf.

71 United Nations Office for Central Africa, *Fight Against Terrorism and Boko Haram*, (June 11, 2015), unoca.unmissions.org/en/fight-against-terrorism-and-boko-haram.

72 Ivan Sascha Sheehan, “Are Suicide Terrorists Suicidal? A Critical Assessment of the Evidence,” *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience* 11, no. 9–10 (2014), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4267802/>.

73 United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner, *Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief.

74 “Country visits and reports,” OHCHR, accessed on August 15, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/country-visits-and-reports

75 *Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*.

76 United Nations Chronicle, *Making Freedom of Religion or Belief a Lived Reality: Threats and Opportunities*, (August 21, 2023), www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/making-freedom-religion-or-belief-lived-reality-threats-and-opportunities.



Nazila Ghanee speaking at the World Humanist Congress (Credit: Arnfinn Pettersen)

native, or non-religious.⁷⁷ Such concerns can lead to the denial of basic rights, such as citizenship. Therefore, they may lose other related rights like education, and access to health or the legal system.⁷⁸ A well-known example is the suffering of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, who have been attacked and forced to flee their homes.⁷⁹ The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority group who have lived for centuries in majority

Buddhist Myanmar. However, they are not recognized as an official ethnic group and have been denied citizenship since 1982. Since August 2017, more than one million Rohingya have been forced to leave their villages and seek refuge in Bangladesh.⁸⁰ The case of these minorities grew worse in 2021 after a military takeover, which started more violence and mass killings in the streets.⁸¹ The Rohingya now rely largely on humanitarian aid for

protection, food, water, shelter, and health.⁸² The majority now live in the Cox Bazar region, one of the world's largest refugee camps.⁸³

Ever since the September 11 attacks in the US, many countries have passed strict anti-terrorism laws.⁸⁴ These laws aim to keep everyone safe, but they may also hurt religious minorities by making it harder to practice their faith openly. Some governments treat peaceful religious groups as possible threats because of their religious identity.⁸⁵ One such heavily criticized law is India's Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. This law was introduced in 2004 and amended in 2008, 2012, and 2019 to allow for arrests based on broader suspicions of terrorism. Under this act, activists and students, mainly Muslims, who protest the government have been arrested for years without trial or charge.⁸⁶

Nazila Ghanee has the power to send letters to governments to warn them about possible human rights violations or advise them on their current policies.⁸⁷ These letters are sent privately to governments for 60 days until a response is given. However, the majority of these

77 Nazila Ghanee, United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council 52/38, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, A/HRC/52/38, (January 30, 2023), docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/52/38.

78 Ghanee, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

79 *Making Freedom of Religion or Belief a Lived Reality: Threats and Opportunities*.

80 "Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained," UNHCR, August 22, 2024, www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained/.

81 "Myanmar: No Justice, No Freedom for Rohingya 5 Years On Anniversary of Atrocities Highlights International Inaction," Human Rights Watch, August 24, 2022, www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/24/myanmar-no-justice-no-freedom-rohingya-5-years.

82 "Rohingya Crisis," UNICEF, accessed August 15, 2025, www.unicef.org/emergencies/rohingya-crisis.

83 "Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained," UNHCR, accessed August 15, 2025, www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained/.

84 *Human Rights, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism*, (Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Factsheet32EN.pdf.

85 *Making Freedom of Religion or Belief a Lived Reality: Threats and Opportunities*.

86 "India: Stop Abusing Counterterrorism Regulations," Amnesty International, November 3, 2023, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/india-stop-abusing-counterterrorism-regulations/.

87 "Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief," OHCHR, accessed August 15, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief.

letters remain unanswered. This was the case when UN Rapporteurs sent a private letter to Nicaragua over their arrests of Catholic Church members and other religious groups. They have also shut down more than 1,000 religious non-profit organizations, as well as universities run by religious institutions.⁸⁸ The Rapporteurs, after unreasonable arrests of Catholic priests, sent their letter to the Nicaraguan government. The letter stressed that Nicaragua's acts are against international law. The government also has targeted people and groups they see as critical or opposed to the government.⁸⁹ Negotiations eventually happened and multiple priests were released from prison.⁹⁰

Ghanea and previous rapporteurs have done a yearly thematic report on the status of religious freedoms. These reports highlight positive progress, add new challenges to the debate, or focus on areas that have not received enough attention. In her most recent report, the focus was on the connection between religion and the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.⁹¹ In her upcoming report, she will

connect religion and displacement, addressing migrants, refugees, and internally displaced persons.⁹²

The UN aims to aid FoRB though countering terrorism while adhering to human rights. Any form of terrorism goes against the core values that keep societies together. It is a threat to peace, human rights, freedom, and democracy. To stop these threats, countries should not only protect their people and resources, but they must also address the deeper causes of terrorism. In response, the UN has worked with many states to build international organizations, community groups, and media outlets to combat both terrorism and the violent extremism that helps it grow.⁹³

For example, after the September 11 attacks in 2001, the Security Council unanimously adopted the Counter-terrorism Committee (CTC) through resolution 1373. This committee is also supported by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), which carries out its policy decisions and conducts expert assessments of the 193 United Nations member states. As of

September 2024, CTED has made over 205 visits to over 119 UN member states, several of which were virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁴ The CTED visits countries on the CTC's behalf. They assess member states' counter-terrorism efforts. They look at progress made, remaining problems, and priority areas that still need support. They also identify trends and challenges, and good practices. These visits are the main way for the CTC to monitor, promote, and facilitate countries in following UN Security Council resolutions.

Later, the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy was founded in 2006.⁹⁵ It is built with four pillars. The first is to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, the second is to prevent and combat terrorism, the third is to help countries build their ability to stop terrorism and to strengthen the UN's role in this issue, and the fourth is to ensure respect for human rights while fighting terrorism. The Strategy also reaffirms that terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality, civilization, or ethnic group. Acts of terrorism can also not be justified by religion.⁹⁶

88 OHCHR, "Nicaragua: UN experts urge freedom for Bishop Álvarez after 12 Catholic priests were released," news release, November 7, 2023, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/nicaragua-un-experts-urge-freedom-bishop-alvarez-after-12-catholic-priests.

89 *Mandatos del Relator Especial sobre la libertad de religión o de creencias; de la Relatora Especial sobre la promoción y protección del derecho a la libertad de opinión y de expresión y de la Relatora Especial sobre la situación de los defensores de derechos humanos*, (Geneva: 2023), spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28270.

90 OHCHR, "Nicaragua."

91 A/HRC/58/49: Freedom of religion or belief and the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment - Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea," OHCHR, January 9, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5849-freedom-religion-or-belief-and-prohibition-torture-and-other

92 Ghanea, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

93 "United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy," UNOCT, accessed August 15, 2025, www.un.org/counterterrorism/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy.

94 United Nations Security Council - Counter-Terrorism Committee, *About Us*, www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/about-us.

95 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 60/288, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, A/RES/60/288, (September 20, 2006), docs.un.org/en/A/RES/60/288.

96 UN General Assembly Resolution 60/288, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, A/60/288, (September 8, 2006), docs.un.org/en/A/RES/60/288.



Muslim protest signs (Credit: Jamie Kennedy)

The UN General Assembly voted to create the United Nations Office of Counterterrorism (UNOCT).⁹⁷ When it was set up, the UN Secretary-General suggested moving other counterterrorism offices into UNOCT so they could work together more effectively.⁹⁸ The main job of UNOCT is to lead and coordinate the UN's fight against terrorism. It works to raise awareness, support the global strategy, and make sure that counterterrorism stays a top priority. In September 2022, UNOCT created five programs

to protect vulnerable places from terrorist attacks.⁹⁹ One of these focused on religious sites, like churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples. The guide they published included examples, tools, and practices from around the world, gathered during meetings with experts and other UN offices. The goal is to keep religious sites safe and open, so people can continue to practice their faith without fear.¹⁰⁰

Additionally, the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) was established in September

2011. It promotes international counter-terrorism cooperation and supports member states in the implementation of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.¹⁰¹ On November 18, 2011, the General Assembly welcomed the establishment of the UNCCT within the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact (former CTITF) of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs in the UN Secretariat and encouraged member states to collaborate with the Centre. The Centre became operational in April 2012 following the first meeting of its Advisory Board.¹⁰² As member states take measures to combat terrorism and prevent or counter violent extremism, the center provides them with targeted support. This helps ensure that all efforts comply with international human rights law, refugee law, and humanitarian law.

Additionally, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) supports states in preventing and addressing crime, corruption, and terrorism by following international laws.¹⁰³ UNODC upholds human rights through its programs and activities around the world.¹⁰⁴ One of their

97 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 71/291, Strengthening the capability of the United Nations system to assist Member States in implementing the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, A/RES/71/291, (June 19, 2017), docs.un.org/en/A/RES/71/291.

98 United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism UN Counter-Terrorism Centre, *An international centre to fight terrorism*, www.un.org/counterterrorism/cct/background.

99 "UNOCT launches five new thematic guides on Protecting Vulnerable Targets Against Terrorist Attacks," UNOCT, accessed August 15, 2025, www.un.org/counterterrorism/es/node/20481.

100 *Protecting religious sites from terrorist attacks* (UNOCT, 2022), www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/2118451e-vt-mod4-religious_sites_final-web.pdf.

101 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 66/10, United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, A/RES/66/10, (December 7, 2011), docs.un.org/en/A/RES/66/10.

102 A/RES/66/10.

103 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Human Rights*, www.unodc.org/unodc/en/humanrights/index.html.

104 *Human Rights*.

greatest initiatives was working with conservative religious leaders on how to prevent extremism

and radicalization. This event was attended by 65 participants and offered a way to exchange ideas in

preventing terrorism and for leaders to teach through peace instead of conflict.¹⁰⁵

CURRENT STATUS

2025 Reports on International Religious Freedom

Every year by May 1, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) publishes a report on the state of religious freedom around the world.¹⁰⁶ These reports began in 2000, following the US Congress's passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998.¹⁰⁷ They provide recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress on how to address violations, promote accountability, and encourage positive change. Although it is US-based, the USCIRF bases recommendations on the provisions of its authorizing legislation and the standards set in the UDHR, the ICCPR, and similar international documents.¹⁰⁸ The report is not officially tied to

US government policies. However, the US can respond to acts of religious intolerance, if prompted by USCIRF. They may suggest freezing foreign money in American banks or banning individuals from entering the country. USCIRF also suggested that US officials meet directly with persecuted minority groups to learn how best to protect them.¹⁰⁹

The reports classify countries into three groups. First are Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs), which includes governments that “engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of FoRB.”¹¹⁰ A second group is those who are on a Special Watch List (SWL). SWLs are governments who engaged in or tolerated severe violations of FoRB but did not rise to the CPC level of “systemic, ongoing, and severe.” Lastly, the third group is Entities of Particular Concern (EPC). EPCs are designated for non-state actors with major political power,

territorial control, uncontrolled by the ruling government, and often commit violence to pursue their interests.¹¹¹ USCIRF can only suggest who should go on these lists and the US Secretary of State makes the final decision.

For 2024, the USCIRF recommended that 16 countries be listed as CPC. The list is Afghanistan, Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nicaragua, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam. Twelve of these were also on the list last year. Countries on the SWL include Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. Two of these were also on the list the previous year.¹¹² Seven groups were listed as EPCs: Boko Haram, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, the Houthis, Islamic State- Sahel Province, Islamic State in West Africa

105 “Defusing religious Extremism: Building the capacity of conservative religious communities as key partners in counter-terrorism efforts” UNODC, accessed August 15, 2025, www.unodc.org/unodc/ngos/dcn21-defusing-religious-extremism.html.

106 “2025 Annual Report: Key Findings and Recommendations,” U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Accessed July 18, 2025, www.uscifr.gov/events/2025-annual-report-key-findings-and-recommendations.

107 “Annual Reports,” U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Accessed July 18, 2025, www.uscifr.gov/annual-reports.

108 USCIRF, *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2025 Annual Report* (March 2025), www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf.

109 *Annual Report: OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM*.

110 “Frequently Asked Questions,” U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Accessed July 18, 2025, www.uscifr.gov/about-uscifr/frequently-asked-questions.

111 “EPCs and Religious Freedom Factsheet,” U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Accessed July 18, 2025, www.uscifr.gov/publication/epcs-and-religious-freedom-factsheet.

112 “Countries,” USCIRF, accessed August 16, 2025, www.uscifr.gov/countries.

Province, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and Al-Shabaab.¹¹³

To be listed as CPC, a country must have allowed particularly severe violations of religious freedom.¹¹⁴ The IRFA has its list of what constitutes “particularly severe.” These include torture, or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and punishment. They also include detention without charges or causing the disappearance of persons by abduction or secret imprisonment. Finally, it also includes denying people their right to life, liberty, or security.¹¹⁵

India and Pakistan are two CPCs accused of cruel treatment. In India, during the 2024 national elections, violence against religious minorities increased.¹¹⁶ The prime minister and other leaders of the ruling party spread hateful messages against Muslims and other minority groups. This led to violence, targeted killings, and the demolition of property and places of worship. In Pakistan, harsh blasphemy laws put Christians, Hindus, Shi'a, and Ahmadiyya Muslims in danger.¹¹⁷

Throughout 2024, four Ahmadi Muslims were killed for blasphemy. In one case, a mob burned a police station to get to a man accused of damaging the Qur'an. Videos of this incident were shared on social media. Footage showed the man's body paraded through the streets and then set on fire.¹¹⁸ The prime minister condemned the incident and ordered an investigation.¹¹⁹ However, attacks on people accused are common in these conservative countries, where charges of blasphemy can carry the death sentence.

Most of the 12 countries under the SWL faced a worsening climate for religious groups. For example, Egypt's government was accused of being unwilling to investigate cases of violence, terrorism, and harassment against Coptic Christians.¹²⁰ Al-Shabaab was recommended three years in a row as an EPC. Al-Shabaab is a militant group in Somalia that took over most of southern Somalia in 2006.¹²¹ Despite their defeat the year after, they have continued their violence in Somalia. The group is

killing hundreds of civilians and soldiers, as well as Christians. Al-Shabaab has even publicly executed individuals they do not see as “good Muslims.”¹²²

The USCIRF reported 201 cases where torture was present. The countries with the highest totals were China at 79 cases, Uzbekistan at 29, Iran at 21, Saudi Arabia at 20, and finally Russia at 18 cases. Despite their diverse political systems, these governments commonly assert authority over personal rights and, in this case, religious rights. Prison remains a common punishment for people on the FoRB Victims List. There were 1,592 imprisonments, followed by 666 cases of detention. House arrest, enforced disappearance, and forced renunciation of faith were much lower, with only 51, 18, and six documented cases.¹²³

Every UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB has also been publishing reports since 1987. At each HRC or General Assembly session, the Special Rapporteur will choose a focus for the annual report through broad consultations with different

113 *Annual Report: OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM*, (March 2025), www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf.

114 *CPC & SWL RECOMMENDATIONS*, (Washington: USCIRF, 2021), www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-11/2021%20Factsheet%20-%20USCIRF%20country%20recommendations.pdf.

115 *INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT (IRFA) AND RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION*, (Washington: USCIS, 2025), www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/foia/IRFA_LP_RAIO.pdf.

116 India: UN experts urge corrective action to protect human rights and end attacks against minorities in lead up to elections,” OHCHR, news release, March 7, 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/india-un-experts-urge-corrective-action-protect-human-rights-and-end-attacks.

117 “Pakistan: Blasphemy Laws Exploited for Blackmail, Profit,” HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, news release, June 8, 2025, www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/08/pakistan-blasphemy-laws-exploited-blackmail-profit

118 “A Muslim mob in Pakistan torches a police station and lynches a man after accusing him of blasphemy,” AP News, June 21, 2024, apnews.com/article/pakistan-mob-killed-suspect-blasphemy-82ab4fc017d92707a3b3398cb3073b51.

119 Haroon Janjua, “Mob storms Pakistan police station and lynches man accused of blasphemy,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/12/mob-storms-pakistan-police-station-and-lynches-man-accused-of-blasphemy.

120 *Annual Report: OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM*.

121 “AL-SHABAAB,” Counterterrorism Guide, accessed August 16, 2025, www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/al_shabaab.html.

122 “Conflict With Al-Shabaab in Somalia,” Center for Preventive Action, October 15, 2024, www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/al-shabab-somalia.

123 *Annual Report: OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM*.

stakeholders and research.¹²⁴

These reports provide analysis and observation of particular trends or issues of concern. It also gives recommendations to the member states and civil society organizations on how to improve religious freedom.¹²⁵

Nazila Ghanea's 2025 report also focused on torture. She explains how freedom of religion often intersects with freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. International laws protect both religious freedom and the right not to be tortured. However, governments, courts, and people helping victims often overlook the link between religion and abuse. Ghanea confirms that this lack of attention means more victims are exposed to harm. She dedicated her most recent report to fill that gap and introduce ways in which these issues can be handled.¹²⁶

The report examines torture and violence justified in the name of religion. Some state and non-state actors have used religious laws or interpretations to permit practices like whipping or beating. While some religious texts speak about the importance of discipline, these have often been misinterpreted to justify violence, such as parents



End torture now protest in the UK (Credit: Maggie Jones)

beating children.¹²⁷ Practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) are also carried out under the guise of religion. FGM is found in parts of Africa, the Middle East, Indonesia, and Malaysia.¹²⁸ Although commonly associated with Muslim communities, it is not required in Islam; the religion does not mandate or even recommend it. Instead, cultural traditions and misinterpretations have kept it alive, with some believing that because the Prophet underwent circumcision, women and girls should as well.¹²⁹ FGM has no

health benefits and instead carries serious risks to girls and women, including long-term health complications and even death. It violates fundamental human rights: the right to health, the right to security, the right to physical integrity, and, in some cases, the right to life.¹³⁰ Related practices such as marital rape and other forms of violence committed in the name of religion are also recognized as human rights violations and remain under UN scrutiny.¹³¹

In the event of these conditions, the Special Rapporteur asks

¹²⁴ OHCHR, "Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief."

¹²⁵ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Annual Reports."

¹²⁶ Human Rights Council, Report 58/49, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, A/HRC/58/49, April 4, 2025, docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/58/49.

¹²⁷ Rita Swan, "Religious Attitudes on Corporal Punishment," Children's Healthcare, accessed August 16, 2025, childrenshealthcare.org/corporal-punishment/.

¹²⁸ Sarah Hayford and Jenny Trinitapoli, "Religious Differences in Female Genital Cutting: A Case Study from Burkina Faso," *J Sci Study Relig* 50, no. 2, 2011, pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4064295/.

¹²⁹ Ibrahim Lethome Asmani and Maryam Sheikh Abdi, *Delinking Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting from Islam*, (USAID 2008), www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/De-linking%20FGM%20from%20Islam%20final%20report.pdf.

¹³⁰ "Female genital mutilation," World Health Organization, January 31, 2025, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation.

¹³¹ A/HRC/58/49.



Rally and march to to denounce hate speech and hate crimes against Muslims.
(Credit: Fibonacci Blue)

governments to reinforce their commitment to protect FoRB and the ban on torture. This means that governments should review their laws to align them with international human rights. Governments should also ensure prohibition on any pressure that forces individuals to change their beliefs or act against their will. They must take seriously the physical and mental harm caused by these pressures and train court staff to better handle and prosecute cases where these rights were violated. States should also aim to prevent detention camps and compensate

the individuals who fall victim to these camps. Finally, governments must ensure that their people know their rights and how to report when their rights are being violated.¹³²

Ghanea also investigated the conditions of people held in jails or prisons. She asks governments to fight discrimination and the insecurity that individuals face because of their religion or belief. This is especially accurate when discrimination is encouraged by state governments. The special rapporteur also provides recommendations for how governments can treat people in

prisons. Religious minorities in detention should be allowed to pray, join services, have religious books, and follow their faith's diet. At the same time, they should never be forced to join religious activities they do not believe in.¹³³

Religious Freedom in the Digital Age

Hate speech can come in many forms. Those include xenophobia, racism, antisemitism, islamophobia, anti-LGBTIQ+, misogyny, and other types of intolerance. Through social media, it spreads faster and further than ever before.¹³⁴ Whether online or offline, hate speech targets and dehumanizes people based on who they are, often by actors seeking political gain.¹³⁵

In 2024, the US Government Accountability Office made a report on hate crimes and hate speech on the internet. Investigations showed that up to one-third of all internet users have experienced online hate speech.¹³⁶ The internet is an easy tool to spread hateful ideologies. Another report by the Anti-Defamation League found that two-thirds of Jewish adults are harassed online for their religion, due to ongoing conflicts between Palestine and Israel. Facebook and Instagram remain platforms where

¹³² A/HRC/58/49.

¹³³ A/HRC/58/49.

¹³⁴ "Countering hate speech," UNESCO, accessed August 16, 2025, www.unesco.org/en/countering-hate-speech?hub=707.

¹³⁵ Elsadig Elsheim, Basima Sisemore, Farah Afify, and Corey Saylor, "The Consequences of Islamophobia on Civil Liberties and Rights in the United States and Its Implications for Muslim Americans," Berkley, June 16, 2025, belonging.berkeley.edu/UPR4-consequences-of-islamophobia.

¹³⁶ "Online Extremism: More Complete Information Needed about Hate Crimes that Occur on the Internet," GAO, February 12, 2024, www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-105553.

the most harassment occurs.¹³⁷

Those who post hateful or extremist speech online may do so to spread their ideologies.

Tragic extremist attacks like the bombing of churches or mosques show how online hate speech can fuel attackers' biases against specific groups, whether based on race, religion, or gender. For example, in New Zealand, the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings were livestreamed on Facebook, and the attacker had been radicalized through online hate communities. Similarly, in India, online hate speech against Muslims has surged on platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter, with several documented cases of digital hate campaigns contributing to mob violence and lynchings. The internet has become a powerful tool for these perpetrators to share their hate.¹³⁸

One reason for this growing religious and political division is the rise of online echo chambers.¹³⁹ Social media and news websites use algorithms to show people the content they want to see. This content then further fuels their existing beliefs and opinions. These algorithms put users in an

information bubble, where they are rarely exposed to opposing views, so all the information they see reinforces one-sided beliefs. Social media apps and news websites use advanced AI algorithms to keep users on their apps for longer. Because of this, it is now more challenging for people to find common ground or agree with those who think differently.

Hate may be delivered in different ways. Someone may make videos mocking a religion, spread false information about a group, or say slurs from fake accounts. Over 50 percent of young people have seen or heard hateful comments about a cultural or religious group online. Indigenous people and the LGBTIQ+ community experience online hate speech at more than double the national average.¹⁴⁰ Owners of social media platforms can also spread harmful messages. In 2025, Elon Musk, owner of X (formerly Twitter), falsely called several Muslim American and Arab American non-profits "terrorist organizations."¹⁴¹ These groups included Islamic Relief, American Near East Refugee Aid, and the Arab American Institute. Posts like this reach millions of

people, fueling Islamophobia and putting Muslim communities at risk.¹⁴² History shows that atrocity crimes often begin with words that spread hate. Prejudice, racism, and exclusion create stigma and discrimination, which can harm organizations and individuals' physical and mental health.¹⁴³

Political campaigns reach a wide audience also through social media. In Brazil's 2018 presidential election, WhatsApp was flooded with fake news stories, doctored images, and religiously charged claims. These were shared across massive group chats, shaping voter perceptions and fueling polarization. Similar tactics have been seen elsewhere. In the summer of 2025, Zohran Mamdani, a Muslim Indian American politician campaigned to run for mayor. During the election cycle, his opponents manipulated a photo of Mamdani. His beard was altered to look darker and thicker. Alongside the photo, headlines claimed that he rejects Jewish rights.¹⁴⁴ In response, Mamdani argued that the image manipulation was Islamophobic and played into racist tropes meant to make him look threatening to his voters.¹⁴⁵ Although many viewers

137 "Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience 2024," NDL, November 6, 2024, www.adl.org/resources/report/online-hate-and-harassment-american-experience-2024.

138 "Examining Social Media Companies' Efforts to Counter Online Terror Content and Misinformation," House Committee on Homeland Security hearing, 116th Congress, June 26, 2019, www.congress.gov/event/116th-congress/house-event/LC64675/text

139 Chinmay Bhalerao, "Understanding the Impact: How AI Algorithms Influence Political and Religious Polarization," *Medium*, June 19, 2023, medium.com/@BH_Chinmay/understanding-the-impact-how-ai-algorithms-influence-political-and-religious-polarization-615e85c92cf4.

140 "Online hate," ESafety Commissioner, accessed August 16, 2025, www.esafety.gov.au/young-people/online-hate.

141 Elsheikh, Sisemore, Afify, and Saylor, "The Consequences of Islamophobia."

142 Servet Gunerigok, "CAIR slams Elon Musk for 'reckless' comment on American Muslim groups," AA, February 24, 2025, www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/cair-slams-elon-musk-for-reckless-comment-on-american-muslim-groups/3491198

143 "Words Matter Conference – Tackling the impact of Hate Speech," OSLO Center, April 23, 2024, oslocenter.no/words-matter-tackling-the-impact-of-hate-speech/.

144 Ellie Quinlan Houghtaling, "Andrew Cuomo Ad Deceptively Edits Photo of Zohran Mamdani, TNR, June 12, 2025, newrepublic.com/post/196734/andrew-cuomo-ad-edited-photo-zohran-mamdani.

145 "Mamdani's Face Was Altered in a Rejected Campaign Flier for Cuomo," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/06/12/nyregion/cuomo-mamdani-debate.html.

realized that the flyer was fake and claims were not true, the act itself was disrespectful to these religious communities.

The European Union has introduced the Artificial Intelligence Act, which is set to take effect in August 2026. This act will require that AI-generated or manipulated media be labeled, unless used for artistic or journalistic purposes. China also requires AI-generated content to be labeled and will require identity verification to prevent fake accounts.¹⁴⁶ Platforms will have to provide a watermark for any AI content to ensure traceability.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is working to protect freedom of speech online. They advocate for transparency and accountability of digital platforms. They also fight against misinformation and hate speech. Most importantly, they work directly with journalists to address information needs in times of emergencies. In addition, they train police and judges on global human rights laws about free speech.¹⁴⁷

In 2023, UNESCO launched Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms, marking the

conclusion of a process started in 2022.¹⁴⁸ They were produced through a consultation with 134 countries to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights when governing the internet.¹⁴⁹ The initial draft from 2022 was heavily criticized for having a small range of viewpoints. The guidelines did not consider different situations around the world that could make it hard to protect human rights. However, many improvements were made in the review of the final text. The guidelines made clear statements for the need to consider the context and environment when choosing the way to handle issues.¹⁵⁰

The final draft outlines five principles to guide how digital platforms should operate.¹⁵¹ First, platforms must protect human rights by running regular risk assessments, especially before elections, to prevent AI-driven disinformation from undermining democracy. Second, they should follow international human rights standards in design and content, ensuring inclusivity and removing racist, sexist, or harmful biases in algorithms. Third, platforms must practice meaningful transparency, explaining terms and rules clearly so users can make informed choices. Fourth, they should provide responsive support in all major

languages where they operate, with special protections for children as vulnerable users. Finally, rules must be enforced with swift action against harmful content that threatens users' rights. Together, these principles aim to safeguard freedom of expression, access to information, and cultural diversity online.¹⁵²

In other circumstances, social media can bring religious communities closer. Apps like TikTok can serve as an educational platform for younger generations.¹⁵³ The Pew Research Center found that around half of TikTok users, 56 percent, say they get their news from this app. Through TikTok, people from different faiths can learn for example what Ramadan is and why Muslim girls choose to wear hijab. They may learn about Ash Wednesday and the days leading up to Easter Sunday. They learn about other denominations and sects of religions. They have an opportunity to understand the true meanings of different religions and beliefs without the stereotypes and assumptions.

Many online interface projects have shown how digital platforms can help build understanding between people of different faiths. For example, the Interfaith Youth

¹⁴⁶ Koon Ghee Wee, "Artificial illusion."

¹⁴⁷ "Freedom of Expression Online," UNESCO, accessed August 16, 2025, www.unesco.org/en/freedom-expression-online.

¹⁴⁸ Maria Paz Canales, "The final text of UNESCO's Guidelines: a more balanced approach to platform governance," Global Partners Digital, December 5, 2023, www.gp-digital.org/the-final-text-of-unescos-guidelines-a-more-balanced-approach-to-platform-governance/.

¹⁴⁹ Ian Shine, "UNESCO wants to develop an 'internet of trust'. Here are its guidelines," World Economic Forum., November 22, 2023, www.weforum.org/stories/2023/11/social-media-governance-guidelines-digital-unesco/.

¹⁵⁰ Canales, "The final text of UNESCO's Guidelines."

¹⁵¹ Shine, "UNESCO wants to develop an 'internet of trust'."

¹⁵² Canales, "The final text of UNESCO's Guidelines."

¹⁵³ Rebecca Leppert And Katerina Eva Matsa, "More Americans – especially young adults – are regularly getting news on TikTok," Pew Research, September 17, 2024, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/09/17/more-americans-regularly-get-news-on-tiktok-especially-young-adults/.

Core uses online platforms to bring together young people from different religious backgrounds. They encourage college-level students to do service projects and develop a radar screen or an understanding of current religious diversity issues. Podcasts have also been a very popular source for dialogue. In 2023, there were over 450 million podcasts whose listeners are becoming increasingly diverse.¹⁵⁴ Around 84 percent of young podcast listeners listen to podcasts to stay up to date and hear unique perspectives not covered in other media.

The future of religion in the digital world is promising. Technology leaves harmful impacts but also has a great potential to allow for a more inclusive and compassionate community. Reflecting on how interface projects have grown and addressing ongoing challenges can help online platforms to be used for strengthening diverse religious groups.

Sustainable Development Goals

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by UN member states in 2015 in the hope that they will be achieved by 2030.¹⁵⁵ Their goal was to set universal targets that meet urgent



Executive Committee for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda
(Credit:Gobierno CDMX)

environmental, political, and economic challenges facing the world. The SDGs replaced the Millennium Development Goals that began in 2000 to fight poverty. One of the past key achievements was lifting over one billion people out of extreme poverty.¹⁵⁶ Given its success, the SDGs were created to tackle more pressing challenges.

These SDGs urge all countries to work together to improve health and education, reduce inequality, raise economic growth, tackle climate change, and preserve oceans and forests, among other targets.¹⁵⁷ Every year, the UN Secretary-

General issues reports to analyze progress on the SDGs around the world. Because of these SDGs, millions have gained access to essential services, yet as of 2025, only 35 percent of SDG targets are on track to be achieved by 2030, half are moving slowly, and 18 percent are moving backwards.¹⁵⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic was a factor in undermining decades of efforts. In 2020, over 100 million people were pushed back into poverty and hunger. Over 255 million jobs were lost.¹⁵⁹ The freedom to worship was also more complex with social distancing.

¹⁵⁴ Kendall Bretiman, "Faith in the Digital Age," Riverside, January 31, 2025, riverside.com/blog/podcast-statistics.

¹⁵⁵ "Take Action for the Sustainable Development Goals," United Nations, accessed August 16, 2025, www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/.

¹⁵⁶ "SDG Accelerator," UNDP, accessed August 16, 2025, www.undp.org/sdg-accelerator/background-goals.

¹⁵⁷ United Nations, "Take Action for the Sustainable Development Goals."

¹⁵⁸ *The Sustainable Development Goals Report*, (United Nations 2025), unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2025.pdf.

¹⁵⁹ "The SDGs in time of crisis: A sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19 as an opportunity to realize the SDGs," United Nations, July 6, 2021, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=20000&nr=7158&menu=2993.

As the pandemic got worse, many houses of worship defied government orders to shut down public worship.¹⁶⁰ In this view, religious freedom was seen as an obstacle to combating the virus.

The 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs is also a blueprint to also make an inclusive and resilient recovery from the pandemic and other setbacks. SDG 10 specifically focuses on reducing inequality. This goal will best address issues regarding freedom of religion and belief.¹⁶¹ This goal is further broken down into seven targets focusing on detailed approaches to freedom of religion. Target 10.2 aims to promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of everyone.¹⁶² This ensures inclusion regardless of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, origins, religions, or

income. Economic prosperity grows when people are allowed to follow their faith. Religious hostilities and restrictions create climates that drive away local and foreign investments, undermine sustainable developments, and disrupt sectors of economies. Religious freedom helps keep peace and stability. Where there is stability, there is also more business.

Since 2000, two-thirds of the 128 countries with available data have helped more people earn over half the average income. Still, about 12 percent of the population now lives below this line.¹⁶³ Structural poverty exposes religious minorities to discrimination, marginalization, and health issues.¹⁶⁴ Following the COVID-19 pandemic, this proportion decreased further in most regions. Regional differences

are notable. In Latin America and the Caribbean, almost one in five people live below 50 per cent of the average income of their country.¹⁶⁵

Target 10.3 focuses on ensuring equal opportunity and reducing inequalities in outcomes. A key part of this is getting rid of discriminatory laws, policies, and actions. For religious freedom, this is important, because it helps dismantle systems that disadvantage or oppress certain religious groups.¹⁶⁶ Target 10.4 encourages countries to create fair tax systems, wages, and social support policies. These rules should help reduce gaps between groups. Fair policies can protect religious minorities and give them the same access to jobs, services, and rights as everyone else.

BLOC ANALYSIS

Points of Division

Countries may fall under these three blocs based on their legal structure, government policies, and culture. The first bloc will have a strong commitment to protect FoRB. They will also ensure that

other countries are capable of doing so. The second will suppress or restrict it. These countries generally have high rates of religious intolerance. They will often score high on the Government Restrictions and Social Hostilities Index reported by the Pew Research Center. The third bloc is more of a

middle ground. Countries in this bloc will oversee FoRB based on their government and culture. Some of these countries are dominated by a religion that holds a special status, with more believers who have more seats in office, or one that receives funding which other religious groups might not receive.

¹⁶⁰ Nilay Saiya, Stuti Manchanda, and Rahmat Wadidi, "Did Religious Freedom Exacerbate COVID-19? A Global Analysis," *Raleigh Health* 62, no. 4, (August 2023), pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10072800/.

¹⁶¹ "Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries," United Nations, accessed August 16, 2025, www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/.

¹⁶² "Reduce inequality within and among countries," United Nations, accessed August 16, 2025, sdgs.un.org/goals/goal10#targets_and_indicators.

¹⁶³ United Nations, "Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries."

¹⁶⁴ Nada Sewidan, "How Discrimination Affects Global Poverty," Borgen Project, accessed August 16, 2025, borgenproject.org/discrimination-affects-global-poverty/.

¹⁶⁵ United Nations, "Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries."

¹⁶⁶ United Nations, "Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries."

Each bloc will have various solutions which they present in committee. While each country will still have personal interests, collaboration will be a key tool to make compromises and get support from countries in other blocs, and create draft resolutions that fulfill many interests. These blocs are only suggestions of what member states are most likely to fall under and not strict categories. States evolve and change their policies every day and can display interest in more than one bloc.

States Promoting Freedom of Religion and Belief

Countries in this bloc will support FoRB both nationally and internationally. They would draft resolutions that aid religious minorities and fund programs that support these initiatives. These countries can provide financial aid, as most of them have a strong economy.¹⁶⁷ A stable economy is common for countries in this bloc. Economic Prosperity grows when people are allowed to follow their faith, making businesses such as tourism more stable.

Canada has one of the most stable economies in the world.¹⁶⁸

They are also ranked among the top ten countries having strong religious freedom. In the list, there is also New Zealand, the Netherlands, Australia, the United Kingdom, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, and Sweden.¹⁶⁹ Other examples include Costa Rica, which abolished its military and emphasizes human rights, and Mongolia, which has been praised for protecting diverse religious practices.

In 2022, Canada's Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs hosted a conference featuring Nazila Ghanea, the UN Special Rapporteur. The goal was to share ideas on how to promote religious freedom around the world. Participants included Christians, Muslims, Jews, Baha'i, Sikhs, Buddhists, and other civil organizations. Recently, they have been working to fight antisemitism and Islamophobia. They appointed a Special Envoy for Holocaust remembrance. They also appointed a special representative to address Islamophobia as well as Canada's Federal Anti-Racism Strategy.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, Norway has long funded interfaith dialogue programs through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while the UK has supported global initiatives to protect persecuted Christians and Yazidis.

The US has USCIRF and supports resolutions promoting FoRB under the UN.¹⁷¹ A recent resolution in June of 2025 promotes interreligious and intercultural dialogue in countering hate speech.¹⁷² The US has also backed investigations into other countries and joined multi-country statements on religious freedom and human rights violations occurring in Xinjiang and Afghanistan, and cosponsored a side event on violations occurring in Tibet.

In committee, these countries will likely co-sponsor strong resolutions, propose language on monitoring mechanisms, and pledge financial or technical support for interfaith initiatives. They could also offer to host international conferences, create global reporting databases, or fund education programs on tolerance.

States Restricting Freedom of Religion and Belief

Members of this bloc will be those with previous violations. Some of these countries are listed by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC). Some of

¹⁶⁷ "Religious Freedom and Economic, Social, and Political Development," Berkley Center, accessed August 16, 2025, berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/projects/religious-freedom-and-economic-social-and-political-development.

¹⁶⁸ "Economic and Political Stability," Invest Ontario, accessed August 16, 2025, www.investontario.ca/economic-political-stability.

¹⁶⁹ "These Countries Are Known for Religious Freedom," US News, accessed August 16, 2025, www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/rankings/religious-freedom.

¹⁷⁰ "Freedom of religion or belief," Government of Canada, accessed August 16, 2025, www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/freedom_religion-liberte_religion.aspx?lang=eng.

¹⁷¹ "International Religious Freedom Reports," US Department of State, accessed August 16, 2025, www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports.

¹⁷² UN General Assembly, Resolution 79/316, Promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue and tolerance in countering hate speech, A/RES/79/316, June 30, 2025, documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n25/177/89/pdf/n2517789.pdf.

them could also be on the Special Watch List (SWL).¹⁷³ Examples include Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and China. China's restrictions on Christian churches, Uyghur Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists show that FoRB can also be limited under communist or nationalist systems, not just theocracies.

The countries of this bloc were reported to have engaged in transnational repression against religious freedom. These are likely to have a state-sponsored religion which heavily influences the government.¹⁷⁴ Some countries employ Sharia law, for example, which is derived from the Quran and prohibits public practice of any religion other than Islam. Pakistan has previously used blasphemy laws to imprison minorities, while Iran continues to execute individuals for apostasy.

These states may water down strong resolution language, frame FoRB as a “domestic matter,” and block international monitoring or sanctions. This bloc may promote alternative frameworks such the *Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam*, which emphasizes religious principles but omits protections like freedom to convert.¹⁷⁵ They may also push compromise language around “respecting cultural values”

or “non-interference,” but rejecting any enforcement mechanisms.

States that oversee FoRB based on their Government and/or Culture

Countries in this bloc may officially recognize the right to practice any religion or belief but still favor one religion over the other. India, for example, does not have an official state religion, but since it is a majority Hindu state, Hinduism has a special status. Similar cases include Sri Lanka, where Buddhism holds constitutional “foremost place,” and Myanmar, where Buddhism has historically been privileged as Muslim minorities like the Rohingya face persecution.¹⁷⁶

While minority religious groups may be permitted to practice their faiths, they often face setbacks in doing so. Acquiring permits to build places of worship has been a common difficulty. Anti-conversion laws, while meant to protect people, hurt those who are willingly converting religions.¹⁷⁷ Indonesia, for example, has a framework which guarantees pluralism on paper but still enforces blasphemy laws in practice. Malaysia recognizes Islam

as the official religion but allows other faiths with restrictions.

In committee, these countries will often take middle-ground positions. They could support broad language on tolerance and education, while opposing international monitoring or sanctions. They might introduce gradual reforms, pilot projects on interfaith dialogue, or UN-backed school programs on religious respect as alternatives to binding commitments.

¹⁷³ “2025 Recommendations,” USCIRF, accessed August 16, 2025, www.uscifr.gov/countries/2025-recommendations.

¹⁷⁴ “Saudi Arabia,” Judiciaries Worldwide, accessed August 16, 2025, judiciariesworldwide.fjc.gov/country-profile/saudi-arabia.

¹⁷⁵ Turan Kayaoglu, “The Organization of Islamic Cooperation’s declaration on human rights: Promises and pitfalls,” Brookings, September 28, 2020, www.brookings.edu/articles/the-organization-of-islamic-cooperations-declaration-on-human-rights-promises-and-pitfalls/.

¹⁷⁶ Sheikh Saaliq and Krutika Pathi, “India’s parliament sees fewer Muslims as the strength of Modi’s party grows,” PBS, May 16, 2024, www.pbs.org/newshour/world/indias-parliament-sees-fewer-muslims-as-the-strength-of-modis-party-grows.

¹⁷⁷ Luke Wilsomn, *ISSUE UPDATE: INDIA’S STATE-LEVEL ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS*, (Washington: USCIRF, 2023), www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023%20India%20Apostasy%20Issue%20Update.pdf.

COMMITTEE MISSION

The delegates of the United Nations Human Rights Council should find ways in which people around the world have the freedom to choose and practice their religion or belief safely. Freedom of religion or belief has many dimensions, and it intersects with many human rights. FoRB can intersect with freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, right to education, etc.¹⁷⁸ This makes UNHRC the most suitable committee to handle this issue. The council does face many challenges when addressing religion-related violations. One major issue is enforcing their policies. The UNHRC can investigate, report, and recommend actions, but cannot directly enforce its decisions.

Although the issue at hand is protected by many international bonds and laws, the majority of these bonds or agreements are non-binding. The UNHRC can condemn certain actions, bring an audience to a certain issue, and provide possible solutions to problems. Member states can ignore resolutions or selectively apply them. Delegates should therefore focus on ways to persuade states, through political pressure, incentives, and international cooperation, to follow recommendations.¹⁷⁹

The committee's goal is to adopt strong resolutions and work with governments that have strict limits on FoRB. While doing so, every human is to be granted their basic rights. The committee should also consider other human rights that can be violated when promoting freedom of religion, such as freedom of expression, equality, and non-discrimination.¹⁸⁰

Delegates could perhaps strengthen the Universal Periodic Review process by including FoRB-specific questions and recommendations. They may propose further fact-finding missions, special rapporteurs, or independent commissions to investigate violations. Delegates can also draft resolutions calling for technical assistance, such as judicial training, legal reforms, or protection programs for minority communities. Even without enforcement powers, reports and resolutions can put global pressure on governments. Positive incentives, such as linking international aid to improvements in religious freedom, may also be effective.

Delegates should also consider forward-looking solutions. Resolutions could encourage education campaigns to counter hate speech, promote tolerance across religions, and create

platforms for interfaith dialogue. They could also propose protections for refugees fleeing religious persecution and safeguards against online hate campaigns that fuel violence. By connecting FoRB to broader rights such as equality, non-discrimination, and freedom of expression, delegates can show how protecting religious freedom strengthens democracy and peace.

Around the world, millions face harassment, imprisonment, violence, or even death simply for practicing or choosing not to practice a religion.¹⁸¹ Every delay allows persecution to deepen and lives to be harmed. Delegates must recognize their responsibility to work in this committee and draft resolutions that bring about real change among countries. Most importantly, delegates should bridge different cultural beliefs and aim to come to an agreement.

¹⁷⁸ "International standards," OHCHR, accessed August 16, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/international-standards#1.

¹⁷⁹ "Welcome to the Human Rights Council," OHCHR, accessed August 16, 2025, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/about-council.

¹⁸⁰ OHCHR, "International standards."

¹⁸¹ Samirah Majumdar, "Number of countries where religious groups were harassed reached new peak level in 2022," Pew Research Center, December 18, 2024, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/12/18/number-of-countries-where-religious-groups-were-harassed-reached-new-peak-level-in-2022/.

RESEARCH AND PREPARATION QUESTIONS

The following research and preparation questions are meant to help you begin your research on your country's policy. These questions should be carefully considered, as they embody some of the main critical thought and learning objectives surrounding your topic.

Topic A

1. How does your country define civic space, and what measures of protection exist for activists, journalists, and the society?
2. Has your country received any type of criticism from international organizations regarding threats to the civic space? If so, how has your country responded?
3. What role does the media play in expanding and constructing civic space in your country?
4. What legal mechanisms exist for citizens whose civic freedoms have been violated?
5. What role can education systems play in encouraging a civic space and its protection?
6. Are indigenous peoples' rights respected or restricted regarding civic participation in your country? If so, what measures has the government taken regarding this?
7. What measures can your country's government take to create an inclusive civic space protection for women, children, and vulnerable groups to raise their voices?
8. How do digital platforms and online spaces impact civic engagement and the ability of citizens to organize, advocate, and express themselves in your country?

Topic B

1. What limitations, if any, exist in the religious practices in your country, and how have they been justified?
2. What policies and measures can be taken into consideration to ensure an equal opportunity for people to access healthcare, education, and employment regardless of their religious preferences?
3. To what extent do the terrorist and extremist groups use religion as a form of justifying the violence, and how can the government of your country respond to this without restricting the freedom of religion?
4. How does your state government manage and regulate religious activities and organizations, funds, and public roles?
5. What role do women play in religious activities in your country, and how can the right of gender equality be present while respecting the freedom of religion?
6. What measures exist to report and monitor any violations of freedom of religion internationally?
7. What examples exist of other countries victoriously protecting the diversity of religion while maintaining good social stability?

IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

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