

The International Religious Freedom Review

COLLECTED WRITINGS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL
CHRISTIAN CONCERN FELLOWS PROGRAM

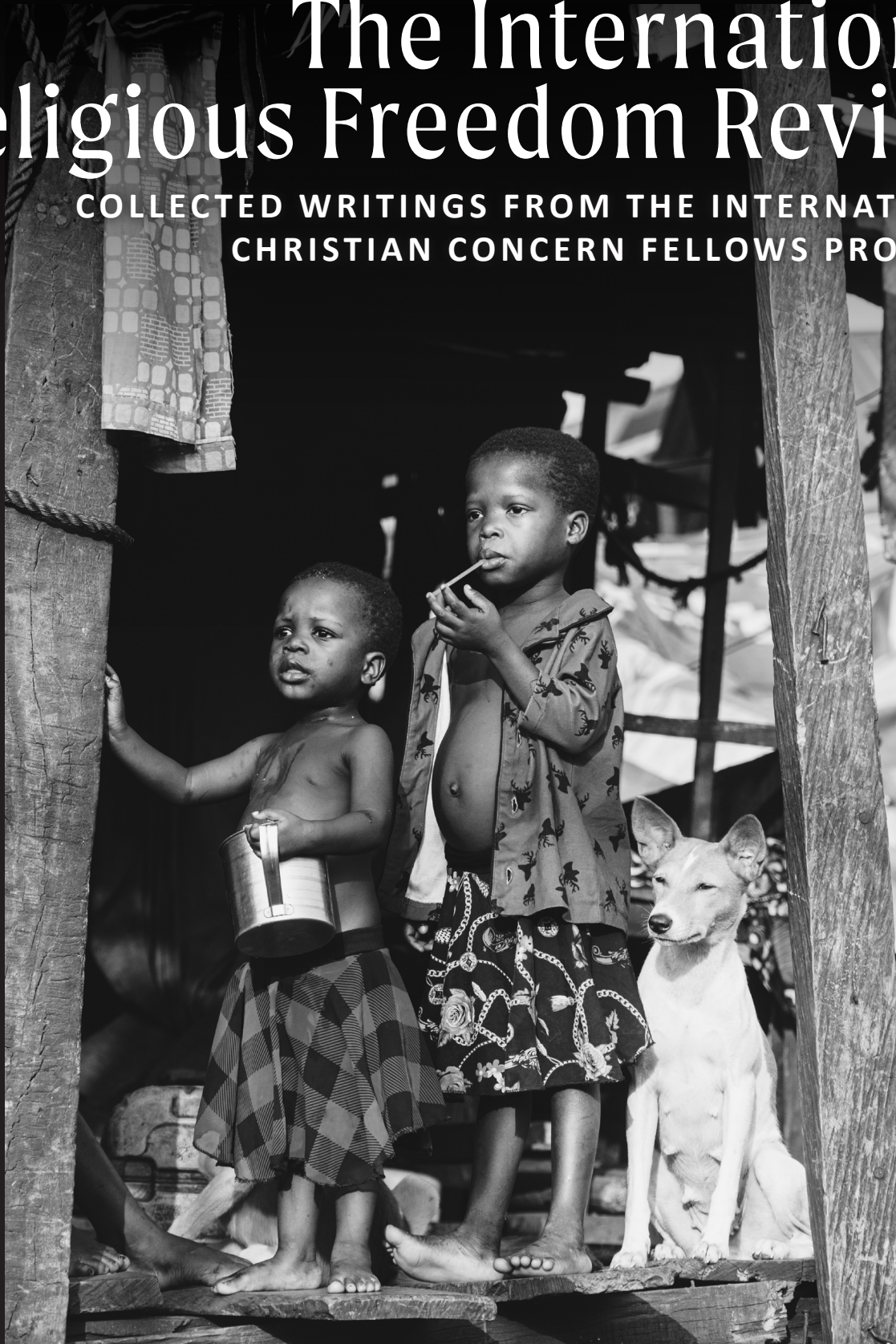




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About the ICC Fellows Program

ICC Fellows are experts, professionals, academics, gifted writers, and Christian leaders who research, discuss, and advance topics relating to Christian persecution and religious freedom. We believe our ICC Fellows make a difference now and for eternity.

Current Fellows

Linda Burkle, Ph.D.

Linda Burkle retired from The Salvation Army in early 2019 where she oversaw an array of social services in a multi-state region. Along with the State Attorney General, Burkle Co-Chaired the Nebraska Human Trafficking Task Force. Burkle holds a doctoral degree in international relations. Her dissertation focused on religious persecution; specifically, regarding Iran, Iraq, Sudan, China, and Burma (Myanmar). She has worked with and ministered to persecuted Christians in several countries.

Gregory Cochran, Ph.D.

Gregory Cochran is the author of *Christians in the Crosshairs: Persecution in the Bible and Around the World*. He serves as a Professor of Theology and Director of the Applied Theology Program at California Baptist University in Riverside, CA. Cochran has a long track record of studying persecution and advocating for Christians around the world. He has served in pastoral ministry for more than 25 years.

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Lisa Navarrette has studied at both Roosevelt and Harvard Universities and is pursuing her Doctorate in Law & Policy at Liberty University. She writes for several human rights organizations and hopes her writing will impact securing justice and human rights for all people.

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Persecution and Cotton

By Lisa Navarette

“For the first time since the heyday of the antebellum South, cotton slavery is once again polluting the local economy on an industrial scale,” said Nury Turkel.^[1] Born into a “re-education camp,” Turkel, a Uyghur, witnessed first-hand the brutal persecution of his people by the Chinese government.

The Uyghurs are a Turkic group that settled in what is now the north-central region of Mongolia. The first accounts date back to the 3rd century A.D. Historically, they were a sedentary village-dwelling people who lived in a network of oases formed in the valleys and lower slopes of the mountains and Orhon River. The cities of Urumqi, Xinjiang, and Kashgar are located on the historic Silk Road bordering Russia and China, making this area rich in trade. The land is also rich in natural resources and minerals, providing the perfect climate for cotton cultivation. This ancestral land is now known as the province of Xinxiang, China.

Recently, the Chinese government has increased its persecution against populations it deems “not Chinese enough.” Many groups have become targets, including the Falun Gong, Tibetan Buddhists, Christians, Hui Muslims, and of course, the Uyghurs. China unveiled its social credit system for all Chinese citizens a few years ago, which monitors the coming and going of people using closed-circuit cameras, and the monitoring of phone apps and purchases. This information is then used to create a social-credit score- a system of ranking each person of their “citizen worthiness.” Unlike a U.S. credit score used to rate credit-worthiness, this social credit score affects where you live, what jobs you can obtain, and where your children can attend school. Those who appear not to hold the government’s values are placed on the government watch list or even worse.

To infiltrate the Uyghurs in Xinxiang, Chinese spies are sent to live with families in the “Becoming Family” program. They report anything they hear or see that is contrary to the government’s prescribed ideals. Anything “suspicious” is reported, from food and alcohol consumption to littering. Because of these reports, parents are sent to “re-education camps” and their children to Chinese Mandarin boarding schools for government indoctrination.

Using Silicon Valley-level AI, the government seeks to create a totalitarian state. With the use of high-tech military camps which employ listening devices in homes, surveillance cameras, and checkpoints, no one is safe in Xinxiang province. In recent years, the world has watched as the Chinese government has imprisoned approximately 3 million Uyghurs in “re-education camps.” These camps are reminiscent of the concentration camps of World War II, where the appalling treatment of prisoners has been reported. The government themselves have supplied images of such camps showing Uyghur men in blue coveralls sitting in the yard with barbed wire fences and armed guards about. Those released have recounted their horrific stories of beatings, torture, rape, waterboarding, and even abortions and sterilization. Forced labor is a hallmark of the “re-education camp,” and its exports bring in billions of dollars to the Chinese government each year.

As mentioned, the province of Xinxiang is rich in mineral and agricultural resources, producing about 20% of the world’s cotton supply. This cotton is used to maintain factory contracts with

American companies, including Adidas, H&M, and Uniqlo. To keep the “cotton flowing,” the government enacted “work placements”- essentially forced labor- upon the Uyghurs.

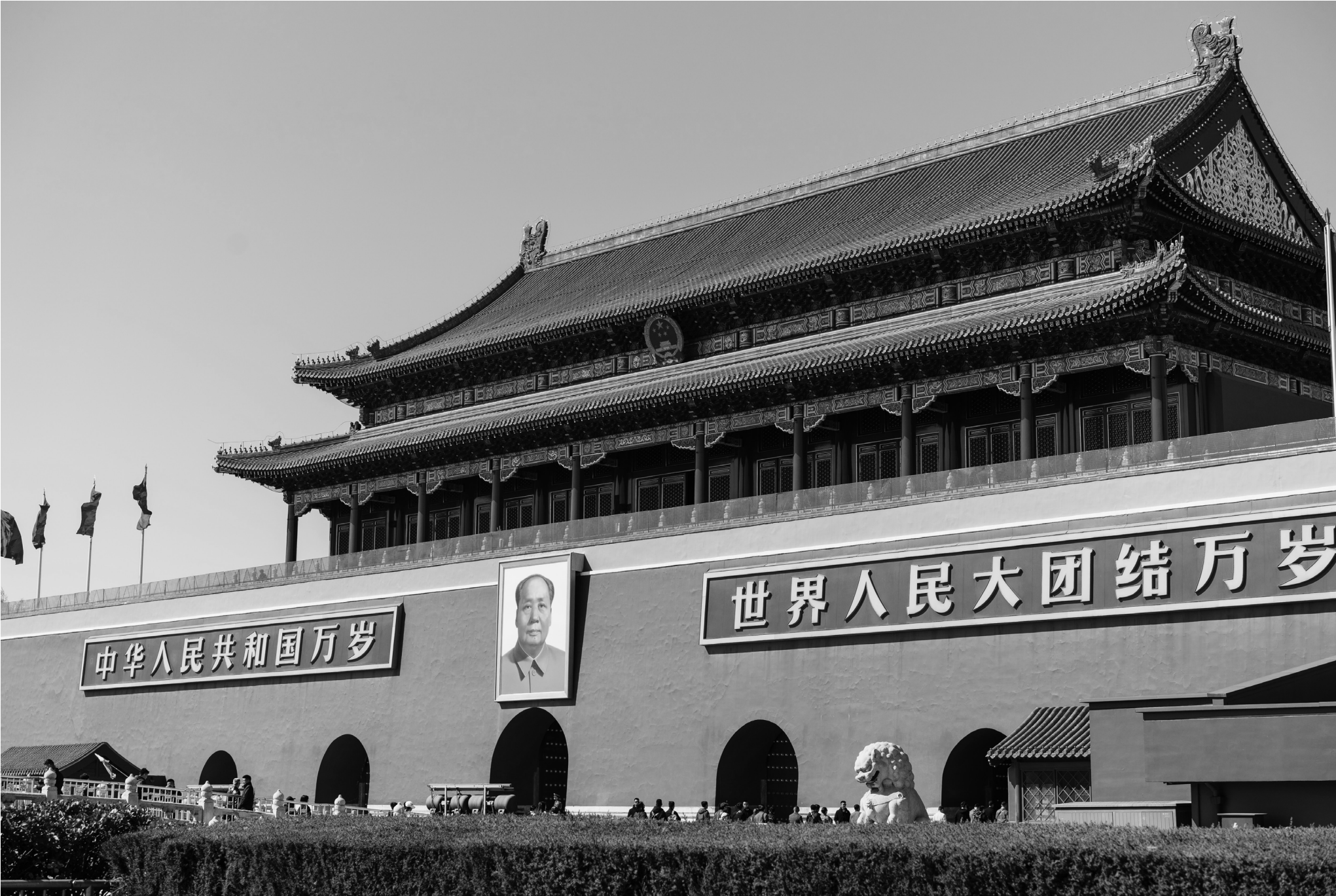
According to a report by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), China’s 2020 textile and apparel exports netted \$291.2 billion, up 7.2% from the previous year.^[2] Eighty-four percent of China’s entire cotton crop comes from Xinxiang, cultivated under the forced labor of an ethnic minority. It is modern-day slavery. It is difficult to measure the profit made by the American companies listed above from the supply of Xinxiang cotton. Last year Adidas made \$25.122 billion, H&M \$22.40 billion, and Uniqlo \$2.02 billion. Billions upon billions of dollars of profit were made directly off the backs of the Uyghurs.

In June, the U.S. passed a ban on cotton from forced Uyghur labor.^[3] The Uyghur Forced Labor and Prevention Act gives U.S. authorities the power to block or seize cotton from the Xinxiang region and impose penalties on companies of up to \$250,000. The ban includes not only cotton from Xinxiang directly into the U.S. but also products exported from the European Union or Britain that contain Xinxiang cotton.

Many in the fashion industry are scrambling to comply. They say it is almost impossible to know where the cotton comes from after the ginning stage (separating the fiber from the seeds) because it is here that cotton from all over the world is processed together. While the Chinese government uses A.I. to control its people, the same technology is used to unravel the cotton supply chain. Tech companies such as TruTrace, Supply Shift, and Textile Genesis plan to use blockchain and artificial intelligence to trace supply chains. In this way, companies will be able to show the cotton’s complete “digital chain of custody.” The U.S. government also announced human rights-linked sanctions against Chinese companies that supply material or parts to Apple, Ralph Lauren, Google, HP, Tommy Hilfiger, Hugo Boss, and Muji from resources curated in Xinxiang.

Such a ban is just one step necessary in combatting the ongoing persecution and genocide of the Uyghurs. Some Uyghurs make it out of the camps and leave China behind. Such is the case with Nury Turkel, the now-American attorney, foreign policy expert, human rights advocate, and vice chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. However, despite or because of this success, his family members are openly detained, harassed, and imprisoned by the CCP. When a Uyghur doctor living in Washington spoke out against the CCP’s policies in the region, her sister, Gulshan Abbas, and aunt disappeared in September 2018.^[4] These family members were sentenced to lengthy prison terms for “terrorism” because their American family members spoke out to expose the truth.

The Uyghurs are not the only ones in China feeling the crushing weight of the Chinese Communist Party. The Falun Gong, Hui Muslims, and Christians are also forced into labor camps, detained, harassed, and killed for their beliefs.^[5] America has always been a beacon of hope and an inspiration for a pluralistic society. The Trump Administration spearheaded the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, which brought leaders from around the globe together to address religious liberty. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a genocide determination on the Uyghurs of Xinxiang, bringing worldwide awareness to the issue. Advancing global religious freedom has always been a bipartisan foreign policy priority. The Biden Administration and Congress must increase efforts via foreign policy to hold the Chinese Communist Party accountable for its violations against religious freedom. Sanctions and bans of products force governments to improve human conditions or risk losing their profit. Will this be enough to stop the Uyghur genocide? Only time will tell. ✝



[1] Turkel, Nury. 2022. No Escape: The True Story of China’s Genocide of the Uyghurs. HarperCollins U.K.

[2] https://apps.fas.usda.gov/newgainapi/api/Report/DownloadReportByFileName?fileName=Cotton%20and%20Products%20Annual_Beijing_China%20-%20People%27s%20Republic%20of_04-01-2021

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/21/us-ban-on-cotton-from-forced-uyghur-labour-comes-into-force>

[4] <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/jailed-12302020182351.html>

[5] <https://www.heritage.org/religious-liberty/commentary/religious-persecution-china-intensifies-brainwashing-camps-christians>

Never again? Never is now.

By Lisa Navarette

In 1927, Yitzhak Lamdan penned the famous poem “Masada: A Historical Epic.” The poem was his emotional response to his struggles as a Jew. The poem became an inspiration, and Jews worldwide embraced it. Lamdan’s words became the collective voice for the Jewish struggle. It became a symbol for Israel and inspired the famous uprising against the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto.^[1]

“Never again” became the rallying cry for Jews. After the atrocities committed in the Nazi concentration camps came to light, the entire world adopted the “never again” slogan. “Never again” would we see and allow concentration camps. To minimize the horrific nature of the camps, ruling governments used more agreeable names, including detention camps, re-education camps, de-radicalization camps, internment camps, and educational camps. Historically, no matter the name, they all have the same horrific conditions, often coupled with human rights violations. They are a legal way for the ruling government to control, torture, and even murder entire populations.

In Cambodia in the 1970s, a re-education camp was really a labor camp. The Marxist leader, Pol Pot, stripped Cambodian citizens of their possessions. He also outlawed property ownership and religion. Pol Pot wished to create an agrarian society, so he forced

the entire population of the capital city of Phnom Penh (2.5 million) to be evacuated and sent to camps in the countryside.

Workers on the farm collectives established by Pol Pot soon began suffering from the effects of overwork and lack of food. Hundreds of thousands died from disease, starvation, or damage to their bodies sustained during back-breaking work or abuse from the ruthless Khmer Rouge guards overseeing the camps.^[2]

Doctors, teachers, and professionals were explicitly targeted as threats to the new regime. They were tortured and executed in camps and jails such as Tuol Sleng jail. This one jail alone imprisoned 17,000 men, women, and children during the regime’s four years in power. Children were often separated from their parents and forced into the military or work camps. In the four years that the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, 1.7 to 2.2 million people were killed.

During the 1990s, Bosnian Serb forces operated 677 detention centers and camps throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. In one single camp, Omarska, approximately 6,000 Bosniak and Croat prisoners were held for five months in 1992. The world responded with horror as pictures surfaced of the prisoners. The horrific conditions were similar to Nazi concentration

camps. Starvation, beatings, tortures, rapes, and murders were common. It is estimated that 20-50,000 women were raped during the war in Bosnia as part of the strategy of ethnic cleansing.^[3]

In Omarska, as in Auschwitz, the masters created these walking corpses from healthy men by employing simple methods: withhold all but the barest nourishment, forcing prisoners’ bodies to waste away; impose upon them a ceaseless terror by subjecting them to unrelenting physical cruelty; immerse them in degradation and death and decay, destroying all hope and obliterating the will to live.^[4]

The world has recently taken notice of China’s treatment of the Uyghurs. In the Xinjiang province, up to 1 million people have been or are currently being detained in concentration camps since 2017.^[5] Like Nazi camps, barbed wire and guns are present. However, China also uses sophisticated AI to track, monitor, and listen to prisoners. Through satellite imagery, journalists found that thirty-nine camps had almost tripled in size from April 2017 to August 2018. Most people in the camps are never charged with crimes, and their only crime is often being religious. Uyghurs are Muslims. While China has labeled these camps as “re-education camps,” they too are truly labor camps. The commodity is cotton, and the forced labor brings billions into China yearly. The UN, US, and other foreign governments have labeled this a genocide. The US has banned cotton imports from Xinjiang.

India is becoming increasingly hostile towards non-Hindu religions. Citizens must now prove citizenship. In India, this is not as easy as presenting a birth certificate, and it is especially challenging in rural areas with low literacy rates. A chain of ancestry from several generations back must be explained, including refugee registration certificates, birth certificates, land and tenancy records, and court papers. In the northeast state of Assam, those who cannot prove citizenship are labeled “foreigners” and sent to concentration camps. Families are being split up, and even Hindu families are at risk of detainment if they cannot produce the documents.

In Assam, a camp costing \$6.5 million is almost complete. This camp holds up to 3,000 prisoners. To accommodate the 1.3 million Muslim population, other camps are under construction or operational in the states of Punjab, Rajasthan, New Delhi, Goa, and Karnataka. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, states such efforts are necessary to “right the wrongs” perpetrated against the predominantly Hindu population. How were Hindus wronged by Muslims? By Muslims moving into India centuries ago, including but not limited to, those who built the Taj Mahal.

Concentration camps are borne out of fear and hate. Different religions or ethnicities are often why entire populations are persecuted and killed. Global governments must ensure human rights and hold governments and leaders accountable for violations. The phrase “never again” is well-intentioned, but it has yet to end modern-day concentration camps. ✝

[1] <https://www.ifcj.org/news/stand-for-israel-blog/masada-epic-poem>

[2] <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/the-khmer-rouge>

[3] <https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/bosnia/the-bosnian-war/>

[4] <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1997/12/04/america-and-the-bosnia-genocide/>

[5] <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>



A Troubling Trend for Religious Freedom in India

By Lisa Navarette



While freedom of religion is integral to our American pluralist life, many countries experience religious oppression through anti-conversion laws. These laws intend to elevate the state-endorsed religion; codified laws forbid individuals from changing from the majority religion to a minority one, particularly Christianity and Islam.

India, Nepal, Myanmar, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan have anti-conversion laws. Recently, there has been growing concern about officials enacting new, more restrictive, and discriminatory laws in India.

India is the birthplace of many world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. In 1950, the nation adopted a Western-style secular democracy. The country is home to thousands of ethnic groups and nearly two dozen official languages. Out of this diversity, one would expect ethnic and religious tolerance to reign.

Recently, Hindu nationalism has become a growing force politically. Hindu nationalists subscribe to the Hindutva, or ideology that only Hindus are true Indians and that all other religions, especially Christians and Muslims, are foreigners who must be expelled.

India's People's Party (BJP) won the national election in 2014. Known Hindu nationalists, including Prime Minister Modi, lead the party. At a conference in 2021, Hindu Mahasabha political party leader Pooja Shakun Pandey and other Hindu leaders made hate-filled remarks about Muslims. "If 100 of us [Hindus] become soldiers and are prepared to kill two million [Muslims], then we will win... protect India and make it a Hindu nation," he said.

India's constitution protects religious freedom citing that "all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice, and propagate religion." Despite codified law

at the national level, state legislatures can and have passed anti-conversion laws.

As the BJP continues to win local and state elections, more states are passing anti-conversion laws. Currently, 13 Indian states have anti-conversion laws. Officials say the purpose of the laws is to prohibit force, fraud, or inducement by minority religions on low-caste Hindus.

Interfaith marriages are also illegal. For instance, if a Hindu spouse converts to Christianity to marry, both spouses break the anti-conversion laws. This scenario fits the definition of "conversion by force" under the law. Whether coercive or not, sentences for any conversion can carry a sentence of up to ten years imprisonment, fines, and denial of government benefits for those who convert.

Christians in India have been persecuted for decades. Yet, since 2021 and the enactment of anti-conversion laws, persecution against Christians has significantly increased. Violence remains at an extreme level. The New York Times also recently reported the situation for Christians is becoming increasingly hostile. Coordinated attacks occur at both the individual level and the institutional level. Christian organizations are subject to legal complaints against them by lawyers and clerks.

Despite the claims that the anti-conversion laws are for the protection of citizens, they continue to fuel religious persecution. Many in the international community, including the U.S. Department of State and the United Nations, have called the laws religiously motivated repression and violence. National organizations have petitioned the Supreme Court of India to create oversight committees to investigate the growing violence against Christians and Muslims.

The organizations contend that the local governments cannot be trusted and often encourage organized, coordinated attacks on religious minorities. They are

asking the Supreme Court to oversee criminal investigations of local police and government. In October, a panel of former Supreme Court justices, former judges from high courts, and a former national government official reviewed hundreds of cases. They found that in 752 of the 758 cases – 99% of cases – the police could have lessened or prevented violence. They also found many discrepancies in police reporting of the incidents. The lack of celerity, severity, and certainty of Hindu extremists' punishment has allowed violence to persist without punishment.

Though individual cases are being heard before the Supreme Court about police complicity during the violence, unauthorized home demolitions of Muslims, and banning hijabs at schools, none have dealt directly with the legality of anti-conversion laws themselves and their impact on individual human rights.

The national government has continued to assert that the laws are non-discriminatory and for protection from radical religious groups. Hindu nationalist organizations, such as Vishwa Hindu Parishad, have petitioned the national government to outlaw all interfaith marriages. Joint General Secretary Surendra Jain led the effort for strict national laws to prevent "illegal conversions." He cited marriage conversion as a cause for social discontent and a threat to national security.

With Hindu nationalists occupying the highest leadership positions at the national level, religious persecution against Christians and Muslims will likely continue indefinitely. Anti-conversion laws at the national level would bring catastrophic persecution of all faiths other than Hinduism.

The Indian government must feel the crushing weight of the international community to expose the violence and demand reforms. ✝

CAPITAL IS THE ANSWER TO GENERATIONAL POVERTY

By Lisa Navarette

Long-term aid often creates a “charity mentality” and stifles the creativity and God-given talent of individuals. A 2020 study found that people who receive charity feel shame. These feelings are derived from not being able to reciprocate the charity and only being on the receiving end.^[i] This is one reason long-term aid is not only not sustainable but harms the recipient(s) and their children. There is an innate human desire in parents to care for their children, to obtain a decent standard of living, and to work hard and see the profits of that effort. Charity will never allow for these desires to be fulfilled.

Capital, not charity, will allow parents to see their dreams become reality. In most countries, being poor is a generational life sentence. The poor, uneducated, foreigner, refugees, and/or religiously persecuted have little to no opportunity to change their class in life. Necessities like education, medical care, housing, and nutrition are difficult to meet, leaving no hope of access to vocational or small business training and funding. Organizations like Grameen Bank and International Christian Concern (ICC) know capital is the way out of generational poverty. Capital can change people’s lives – even on a minuscule level.

In 2006, Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize for

his work providing capital to the poor – in the form of microfinance.^[ii] He founded Grameen Bank in Bangladesh on the belief that capital is a human right. Yunus was no banker, but an economics professor working at the University of Chittagong when a famine struck Bangladesh in 1974. Seeing how his neighbors were suffering, Yunus began loaning small sums of money – often less than \$25 USD – to aid the poor in starting small businesses. He noticed that they did not have a charity mentality but were hard-working people who wanted the dignity of working to support their families. The only thing standing in their way was access to capital.

The poor have an especially challenging time in countries where they lack access to capital. Prior to Grameen Bank, many Bangladeshi villagers were forced to turn to local loan sharks for money. The interest was so exorbitant that one small loan for medical treatments or school fees could enslave an entire family for generations.

Interestingly, Grameen’s borrowers are ninety-six percent women. The bank identifies a community of women who wish to start or have already started a small business to support their families. From sewing to convenience stores, women started a small local economy. Several women receive initial funding, which they pay back monthly into the community pool of funds.

The interest is extremely low, making repayment possible. The funds are then distributed to the next few women in the pool to start or grow their businesses. As each entrepreneur pays back their loans, they are then able to borrow larger sums to continue to grow their business.

When asked why Grameen only lends to women, Yunus explained that women, in general, take care of their families and their communities. They will sacrifice to see that their children are fed, clothed, and educated before they will spend the money frivolously on themselves. The accountability achieved through this community model has achieved phenomenal results with repayment rates over ninety-eight percent.^[iii]

Because of access to capital, whole villages in Bangladesh were lifted out of poverty. Grameen Bank now operates in 11 countries serving more than 1 million clients.^[iv] Its success has been a model for other microfinance organizations. ICC not only meets the immediate needs of our Christian brothers and sisters but supplies the capital and training. Being a persecuted or displaced person no longer is a generational life sentence of low education, marginalization, and poverty. Aid should include vocational training or business training with capital. This is part of the way that ICC partners with aid recipients. Following country-specific guidelines from the UN Humanitarian Aid Charter, ICC supports its recipients with livelihood training and cash assistance projects.

Muslims who convert to Christianity face immediate dangers including physical violence, lack of community and familial support, prosecution, job loss, displacement, and even death. ICC supplies at least six months of basic care. It includes not only a safe place to live, medical care, food, and education for their children, but also job training, small business training, and start-up capital. This holistic approach of “generation transformation” combines quality education for the children, while providing vocational and small business training and funding to the parents. This partnership allows displaced Christians to become self-sufficient. When parents can once again provide for their children, a sense of dignity is restored. ICC’s Hope House in the Middle East is the perfect example of success stories using this approach.^[v]

In recent years, Nigeria has been ranked the most dangerous country for Christians. Believers are attacked, displaced, kidnapped, and killed for their faith. ICC has worked hard to identify needs and put programs into action. Here, the business is farming. Community farms have been established as both livelihood initiatives and sources of sustainable food.^[vi] Communities receive seeds, gifts-in-kind, and ongoing training to ensure their success. Through generous donors, 20 farms have been set up in Nigeria, but the work does not stop there. ICC has identified other communities that need such farms. While gifts-in-kind and short-term aid are necessary, training and access to capital is a generational game-changer for the poor and persecuted. †

[i] Parsell, C., & Clarke, A. (2020, October 21). Charity and Shame: Towards Reciprocity. Academic.oup.com. <https://academic.oup.com/socpro/article/69/2/436/5934016>

[ii] Nobel Prize. (2019). The Nobel Peace Prize 2006. NobelPrize.org. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2006/yunus/facts/>

[iii] Kamaluddin, S. (n.d.). Grameen Bank, Bangladesh. Www.gdrc.org. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.gdrc.org/icm/grameen-article4.html>

[iv] Grameen Foundation. (2023). Grameen Foundation. Grameenfoundation.org. <https://grameenfoundation.org/partners/about-us/where-we-work>

[v] International Christian Concern. (n.d.). Generation Transformation. International Christian Concern. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.persecution.org/projects/generation-transformation/>

[vi] “Nigerian Christian Farmers in Crisis.” International Christian Concern, www.persecution.org/nigeria-crisis/. Accessed 9 Jan. 2023.



PART 1



CHINESE CONFORMITY AND GLOBAL AUTHORITARIANISM

By Lisa Navarrette

China has been increasing human rights abuses for years. Disappearances, persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, organs for sale, controlled press, and surveillance of its citizens have made international news. Authoritarianism on this scale takes years to cultivate.

This five-part series will discuss how social conformity was perfected throughout China's recent history and its role in creating the global authoritarian influence of modern China.

What is social conformity and why is it dangerous? Because humans are social beings, they look to create group cohesion. Conformity is common across all societies, races, and ethnicities. It is an inherent part of the human experience. Individuals seek to create agreeance with others by copying their beliefs and behaviors. No one wants to be ostracized. Therefore, individuals will look to the group to decide what to think and will behave as expected.

Psychologists call this social proof- the assumption that if other people are doing it, it must be correct. [i] This occurs mostly subconsciously. On one hand, conformity to group norms leads to a sense of belonging and encourages morality. On the other hand, when resulting norms and practices are never questioned, it can lead groups of people to allow the worst large-scale human atrocities. Most individuals will conform. When an authoritarian government controls the entire society, it is difficult not to. This level of control takes time to cultivate.

China is an ancient society. For more than 4,000 years, it was ruled by authoritarian dynasties. It was historically a peasant society. Dynastic rule solidified their dependence on their ruler. The feudal, peasant economy determined social and economic interactions. In agrarian societies, the local population is interconnected for their survival. Instead of individual achievement and rights, collectivism is the norm, necessary to ensure life continues for all.

In 1911, the Qing dynasty was overthrown ending the long tradition of dynastic rule. Modern political, social, and economic ideas were thrust upon the country through foreign assaults and occupation. During the period from 1911 to 1949, China attempted to redefine its new political identity. Warlords engulfed the country and government parties fought for control. In 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established, just two years after Lenin founded the Communist International (Comintern) to coordinate efforts to spread communism throughout the world.

In 1949, the CCP defeated the Nationalist Party and Mao Zedong became its leader. He established the People's Republic of China. The party assumed control throughout the country and created their version of social order and social stability. The goals of Mao were class struggle, anti-intellectualism, economic development through the communal system, and isolation from the rest of the world.

In 1958, the Great Leap Forward was introduced. Its goals were to maximize agriculture and industrial production through mass mobilization. At the forefront was the desire to eliminate all private property and forcibly impose socialist ownership. The goals were far too ambitious. Skilled managers were replaced by Communist Party cadres. Decisions were made in a communal setting, but these cadres lacked the necessary technical expertise. Several failures occurred because of this including a serious famine.

During the cultural revolution of the 1960s-70s, Mao organized young people into Red Guard units. Their job was to attack old thoughts, culture, customs, and habits. Economic, social, and political institutions were weakened, and the situation in China was chaotic. Because the police and other criminal justice components were under attack, the military was used to maintain order. This marks the beginning of military involvement in civilian and political issues in China. [ii]

Deng Xiaoping came into power after Mao. His agenda was far different from Mao's. He focused on agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. This ended its isolationist policies. China began an open-door policy with the West to acquire knowledge and technology. Deng attempted to modernize China by establishing a strong military, grooming future leaders, giving authority to local governmental units, and creating a new Constitution and new criminal code in 1982.

Some freedoms were allowed during this era, unintentionally a result of growing capitalist methods that resulted in economic gains. Deng emphasized order and stability and adherence to party discipline and its leadership. Democratic reform was occurring in the Soviet Union and developing in Eastern and Central Europe. The protest of Tiananmen Square in 1989 began because of issues of corruption; however, scholars tend to agree that it developed as part of this democratic global movement. [iii]

Dang was determined to maintain control, and protesters from all classes, not just students, were killed by the People's Liberation Army in the streets around the square. Though China was modernizing, the Communist Party used police, procurators (prosecutors), judges, and even the military to maintain control at all costs. Some party members pushed for reformation to become more democratic in nature and have additional accountability.

Zhao Ziyang was one of these casualties. He was a high-level official in the Communist Party who advocated for the party to enhance human rights and increase democracy. He was confined to house arrest after the Tiananmen Square massacre, where he remained for sixteen years until his death in 2005. He left an extensive collection of audio tapes and writing which were published after his death. His accounts tell the story of corruption among party members, human rights abuses, and the silencing of anyone who speaks out against the party. [iv]

Jiang Zemin was general secretary from 1989-2002. Under his leadership, the revolutionary views of the Communist Party were reshaped. They embraced ideologies that the Party represented society's most productive economic forces, society's most advanced culture, and the interests of all people. He encouraged individual initiatives across all industries, igniting the entrepreneurial spirit of Chinese citizens. During Zeman's tenure, the Communist Party was characterized as highly bureaucratic, highly centralized, and rigid. Seeing the demise of communism in the Soviet Union and other areas of Eastern and Central Europe, the Party concluded that political and social control should be enhanced. Many top officials were labeled as traitors and enemies of the state. They were removed from their posts, imprisoned, and killed for seeking reforms. These extremes still occur in today's China. Not even being a high-level government official will keep you safe from the conformity, corruption, and power of the party. In China, no one is safe.

Modernization has occurred in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense. Another area of economic dominance is through trade and investment in developing countries.[v] Economic policies, since 1978, have raised more than 800 million people out of poverty.[vi] They have also increased access to health care and education for the masses.

People often become complacent when there is economic stability, willing to overlook abuses by the government. While the economy of China has modernized with policies to encourage entrepreneurship, the accompanying freedoms of individual rights have not followed suit.

Human rights are codified in the Constitution, but not practiced. Citizens are subjected to state-controlled media, statistics, and surveillance. It is dangerous to speak out against the government of China and those who do often disappear or are made public examples. China continues to feed incorrect statistics and news to the international community as it attempts to conceal its control and human rights abuses.

The general conformity of the people to socialist policy can be traced to the centuries of dynastic rule and, more recently, an oligarchic state. Centuries of feudalism created interdependency. To survive peasantry, communities had to work together toward collective stability and prosperity. With the onset of Communist rule and the crushing weight of the party, centuries of cultural collectivism were exploited. Conformity is no longer a choice; it is now a requirement.

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PART 2

China has changed in significant ways since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. Xi began an intensive anti-corruption campaign. To Western eyes, this was heralded as a step toward a more democratic society and accountability within the Chinese Communist Party.

More than 600,000 officials were investigated each year from 2019 to 2021, with nearly half receiving some form of punishment. [i] Many believe this was a way to find those who would question the party and remove them from office- thereby increasing Xi's power.

Massive crackdowns on borderlands including Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong have brought them under the control of Beijing. Xi created a national security law in 2019 to respond to anti-government protests in Hong Kong. Millions of people have been imprisoned in Xinjiang, while millions of dollars have been added to the security budget in Tibet.

Taiwan has become a contentious issue as China said it plans to reunify it with Beijing. They have been conducting military training in the region and now have the largest navy fleet in the world. Xi has taken over many sectors of the economy, making them state-owned and controlled. To centralize power at this level, the government must maintain control over its population.

China has become the world leader in population control. The government uses surveillance, controls information, suppresses any opposition, creates a network of informants, makes examples of those who question you, and feeds the international community false news and statistics. Silicon Valley-level artificial intelligence and a lack of government accountability have allowed it to infiltrate all aspects of daily life. The effectiveness of pre-emptive control largely depends on surveillance capacities, either from the governmental apparatus or grassroots informants. These combined efforts have paid off for the Chinese Communist Party.

The Digital Silk Road Initiative includes the building of global data infrastructure and surveillance technology. This is used domestically to assert authority over citizens, censor the media, quell protests, and oppress minorities.[ii] Much discretion is given to local authorities whose careers depend on how well they can exert control over their local population.

While voice and audio surveillance work well, nothing beats local informants who are willing to turn over their family members and neighbors for minor infractions such as littering or drinking too much alcohol. More than 180,000 protests take place in China each year. Protesters are often objecting to specific issues and not issues of human rights.[iii] Surveillance technology alerts the government of upcoming protests, which they combat swiftly. Local governments are afforded too much discretion and little oversight leading to human rights abuses and no accountability.

The government compiles data on individuals, government officials, and companies by using a nationwide tracking and biometric system known as the Social Credit System. Individuals can be flagged for minor offenses such as "spreading rumors" online. People with low social credit scores may be barred from travel, lose access to educational and job opportunities, and be denied other social services. This credit system is a means of exerting even tighter social control. This makes it dangerous for a person, and their family, to question the government.

Though the Chinese constitution allows freedom of speech and press, Chinese media regulations allow authorities to infiltrate any news stories by claiming they "expose state secrets and endanger the country." Officials know they must retain control over the news to keep power. In 2010, the government issued directives requiring all Internet users in China, including foreign organizations and individuals, to abide by Chinese laws and regulations

about Internet information. The goals of these directives are not free speech and the free flow of information but "must reflect the party's will, safeguard the party's authority, and safeguard the party's unity."

President Xi emphasized that the nation's media outlets are essential to political stability, but the international community knows information control is essential for political power. China relies on censorship to control information in the news online and on social media. Chinese journalists and media organizations are forced to censor themselves and if they do not, they are subject to libel lawsuits, arrests, and other means of force.

The group Reporters Without Borders ranked China 179 out of 180 countries in the 2023 worldwide index of press control. [iv] Because so many foreign and domestic journalists have been imprisoned in China, it has been dubbed the "world's largest prison for journalists." Many U.S. websites and social media outlets including Facebook, Instagram, and Google are blocked from the Chinese public. This extreme censorship is called the Great Firewall, and it is increasing in its censorship. [v]

China also publishes daily news articles highlighting various homicides in the U.S. to show its citizens that the U.S. is a violent, tumultuous country where no one is safe and where no Chinese should venture. [vi] It is important to note that the news industry is very profitable. It is entirely controlled by the government and the Chinese Communist Party. The Party is seeking to pass a law banning all private investment in the media, which would further its control. With the news censored, it is difficult to know just how bad the situation is in China.

Because China censors the news, it is no wonder that they tamper with crime statistics as well. Access to reliable crime statistics makes it difficult to gauge the criminal justice system's fairness or effectiveness. Crime and death penalty statistics often go underreported by Chinese officials to legitimize the authoritarian regime. The published statistics show that Chinese crime rates stay low when compared to other countries, though recent leaked information shows a growing rate of violent crime, drug use, and gang-related delinquency. [vii]

Interestingly, a recent study found that 53% of Chinese citizens support various forms of state surveillance.[viii] It is uncertain whether respondents were under duress. Like all Chinese statistics, there is a good probability this statistic has been altered by the government. If, however, the collective citizenry favors such heavy surveillance and punishment tactics, the theory of social conformity is proven. Prioritizing public interest over individual rights allows the government to use such tactics to keep social control. This level of control has led to persecution, human rights abuses, and punishment in recent years.

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PART 3

The U.S. government designated the atrocities against the Uyghurs as genocide. Undeterred by such international scrutiny, China continues its persecution of religious persons. The 2021 “Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy” instituted new measures for tighter control and surveillance of clergy. It bans any religious activity from independent religious clergy.

Articles VI and XI prohibit clergy from “engaging in illegal religious activity, religious extremism, and foreign infiltration using religion.” It also requires a political test to ensure the clergies’ loyalty to the Chinese Community Party. Experts agree that these new measures are another legal route for the government to persecute religious citizens freely and openly under the guise of national security. [i]

China has increased its efforts to silence, and in some cases annihilate, ethnic and religious minorities such as the Uyghurs, Tibetan Buddhists, and Christians. Christians specifically have come under extreme persecution after a 2018 law restricting religious freedom. According to Open Doors International, there has been an increase in surveillance and restriction including demolition of churches, abduction, arrest, and detainment. [ii] Anyone can be charged at any time, and in China, it is nearly impossible to defend oneself once charged. Many charges are vague such as “stirring up trouble” or “being a threat to state security.”

The United Nations estimates that 1-2 million prisoners are held in prisons and re-education camps in China.[iii] Political prisoners are remanded to a facility whose goal is reform through labor. These facilities house 3,000-5,000 inmates. Inmates are part of a squadron of ten. They go through their entire day together. Through this collectivism, they control, monitor, and report on each other. According to the government, they can receive visitors monthly and write letters. The nature of the work will depend on the geographic location of the prison. For instance, the United States recently banned the import of cotton produced by Uyghur prisoners in the Xinjiang province.[iv]

The prison diet has low nutritional value, and rations are tied to work production. Inmates are required each evening to study communist ideals. A trained political instructor monitors the inmates and determines if they are eligible for early release. Reformation is considered complete when the inmate acknowledges their guilt for the offense, criticizes their own antisocial behavior, and conforms to the facility's rules. An inmate has the opportunity for parole after serving half of their sentence, or at least 10 years of a life sentence. This depiction of prison life was provided through published Chinese documents.[v]

But as we know, China controls all information. Personal accounts of prison life have surfaced from former prisoners. They recount horrors such as forced medical tests, sleep deprivation, barbaric torture, humiliation, beatings, being forced to eat their own feces, marching, standing, and sitting for long periods on tiny stools. [vi] The China Tribunal concluded that China is harvesting organs for sale from prisoners. The organs are sold on the black market and generate over \$1 billion for the Chinese government annually.[vii]

China allegedly carries out more executions than anywhere in the world.[viii] Though statistics are not published, it is estimated that between 2009 and 2015, at least 19 foreign nationals were executed in China for drug charges alone.[ix] American citizens are not exempt from receiving the death penalty. An American was sentenced to death over alleged drug trafficking, even though no evidence was found on his person or belongings.[x]

The presumption of guilt, instead of the presumption of innocence in democratic societies, makes it difficult for one to defend oneself from accusation. Simply being a suspect can have severe consequences for both suspects and their families. Those who defy norms or question the government are held as examples of civil disobedience to the socialist order. The government regularly uses death sentence parades and public executions to ensure social conformity.[xi] Codifying human rights may have little effect in a society where crime is viewed as a violation of collective rights and a rebellion against the socialist order and government.

China’s detention and investigation policies allow great discretion by local police, which can lead to corruption. China is an example where forced confessions and false imprisonment occur because of their commitment to keeping the communist party in power. Anyone who speaks out against the party will receive swift sanctions. China has perfected an authoritarian regime on its home front and wishes to expand its communist ideals to other parts of the world. China uses its infrastructure financing to gain influence and control over second and third-world countries. Because of this, the world is becoming more authoritarian.

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PART 4

TChina has the second largest population on Earth at 1.4 billion. With two million active soldiers and the largest navy fleet in the world, China is a force to be reckoned with. [i] China is now a global actor, exerting its influence in every corner of the world including the South Pacific, South and Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. China is transitioning from a manufacturing-driven economy to a services-oriented financier. Worldwide, China invested nearly \$1 trillion in emerging markets in the last ten years. It is the world's single largest creditor nation.

China's trade reached \$495 billion in Latin America and the Caribbean with infrastructure projects and fuel trade. South America is the largest producer of lithium which is important for Chinese supply chains and electric vehicle batteries. China has increased investment in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Nicaragua, and Peru. Argentina is negotiating a series of construction projects with China. In January, the two countries agreed to drop the U.S. dollar in bilateral trade.

In Peru, China committed \$3.6 billion to build a mega port after acquiring 60% of a Peruvian mining group. Chile has benefited from \$8 billion of investment from China, and China is seeking to build its own factory in Chile to produce lithium. Recently, Brazil signed 15 agreements with China to include cooperation on semiconductors, cybersecurity, and 5G mobile communication. Many other Latin American countries are seeking investment from China to build mega ports, data centers, and telecommunication centers.

Free trade agreements are for the mutual benefit of both countries. However, China is facing criticism for its lending practices to poor countries, leaving them struggling to repay debts and open to a Chinese takeover. More

than 40 low- and middle-income countries have debt exposure of more than 10% of their GDP. Countries such as Djibouti, Laos, Zambia, and Kyrgyzstan have debts equal to 20% of their GDP. [ii]

This allows China to exert considerable influence on nations it has loaned money to. Critics have pointed to Sri Lanka as an example of how Chinese investment can leave a country crippled and under Chinese power. Sri Lanka borrowed funds from China to build a massive port project using loans and contractors from China. The effort struggled to be viable leaving Sri Lanka saddled with growing debts. In 2017, Sri Lanka agreed to give China a 70% stake in the port on a 99-year lease in return for further Chinese investment.

With debt enslavement on a massive scale, China can exert its version of human rights on the African continent. The Burkina-Faso ambassador, Adama Compaore, stated that "Western forces were hyping up the so-called Xinji-ang-related issues and launching unprovoked attacks on China" while the Congolese ambassador, Daniel Owassa called the genocide of the Uyghurs "anti-terrorism measures." [iii] Poor developing countries- many highly in-debted to Beijing and dependent on China for most trade- are not able to condemn China for human rights abus-es. China also organizes academic conferences and supplies the technology in Africa to normalize its alternative, authoritarian international law, and illiberal, China-dominated global order.[iv]

Other countries that trade extensively with China, such as Myanmar, India, and Malaysia are mimicking China's policies and becoming more authoritarian.

In the majority Buddhist country of Myanmar, thousands of Christians and Muslims have been murdered in a na-tionwide government crackdown on religion. [v] While another 700,000 have been forced to flee to Bangladesh. [vi] India continues to build concentration camps to house religious minorities. When the state of Manipur had a violent ethnic clash in May, the government shut the internet down to "prevent social media from stirring unrest." [vii]

Recent legislative amendments have been enacted in Malaysia to codify torture and prevent protests. [viii] What do all these countries have in common? They all rely heavily on trade and investment from Beijing. China's global investment and growing authoritarianism are dangerous to freedom, particularly religious freedom.

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PART 5

While the theories of socialism have appealed to many in America in recent years, its reality falls short of the utopian dream. While China has created a dynamic economic system, it has not afforded the norm of individual and fundamental human rights to its citizens. China codifies laws to appear sensitive to international human rights standards. The reality, however, is quite different for both citizens and foreign nationals.

China has kept its past socialist ideals and expanded its control over its citizens. It has committed genocide and other atrocities on its people in recent decades. Its detention and investigation policies allow great discretion by local police, which leads to a lack of accountability and corruption.

Forced confessions and false imprisonments are normal occurrences. Anyone who is even suspected as an opponent of the Chinese Communist Party receives swift sanctions. Because of the Silicon Valley-level technology they own and growing global influence, they may just be the most dangerous party in the world.

Surveillance and control of information have reached unprecedented levels in China. The international community must demand access to reliable news and crime statistics. Crime and death penalty statistics often go underreported by Chinese officials to legitimize the authoritarian regime.[1] Reported Chinese crime rates stay low when compared to other countries, though it is difficult to know if the statistics are correct. The growing rate of violent crime, drug use, and gang-related delinquency is concerning.

The general conformity of the people to socialist policy can be traced to the centuries of dynastic rule and, more recently, an oligarchic state. The people of China were groomed to accept social conformity, and this conformity continues to be exploited by the Chinese Communist Party.

Citizens may see these harsh punishments as fair and equitable because, in their eyes, crime violates the collective rights of society. The presumption of guilt, instead of the presumption of innocence in democratic societies, makes it difficult for one to defend oneself from accusation.

Simply being a suspect can have severe consequences for both suspects and their families. Those who defy these norms are held as examples of civil disobedience to the socialist order through various means, such as death sentence parades and public executions.[2] Codifying human rights may have negligible effect in a society where crime is viewed as a violation of collective rights and a rebellion against the socialist order and government.

Chinese citizens must work together and fight against the oppressive government. To do that, they must have access to non-controlled domestic and international information and adopt democratic principles. Only then will they understand the value of individual inalienable rights and fight the oppressive government for their freedoms.

While watch groups, religious persecution organizations such as International Christian Concern (ICC), and journalists have done their part to expose China's atrocities, the international community has done little act against China. The international community must continue to expose China's human rights violations and its persecution of ethnic and religious minorities. Imposing government sanctions on China is one way to increase compliance and accountability. The international community should demand that China publish its capital punishment statistics. In addition, China should allow for more humanitarian actions to be afforded to the condemned, such as psychiatric evaluations for mental illness and contact with family and friends before the execution. [3]

People of faith supply important checks on government because they hold an allegiance to a power higher than the government. The government is a God-ordained institution, accountable to God. The function of government is to restrain evil and support and protect the sanctity of life. When the government is no longer just, it is the task of the church to expose the government and demand its officials repent. The local church is the hope of the world, and that is the case in China. Christianity has grown faster in China than anywhere else in the world in the last 40 years- from 1 million to 100 million currently. [4]

China is in a recession now. The state-controlled economy drove up urban unemployment and lowered consumer confidence. While incomes are going up for those who are employed, students, and the massive aging population find it hard to find jobs and stay afloat. With economic prospects bleak, this may be the perfect time for citizens to question and challenge the government.

Centuries-old social conformity has led to increasing global authoritarianism by China. The spread of China's investment and authoritarian principles to other countries is concerning. The atrocities committed by the Chinese government against their people must be met with action by the international government. The Christian church must be strengthened by its global brothers and sisters as it looks to combat the evils of the Chinese Communist Party. ✝

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THE ONGOING REIGN OF TERROR IN MOZAMBIQUE

By Linda Burkle, Ph.D.

With so many catastrophic events occurring throughout the world, it is not surprising that many ongoing humanitarian crises continue without much attention. Currently, the global community is focused, rightfully so, on the horrific earthquakes that have devastated regions of Turkey and Syria. Simultaneously, the Russian war against Ukraine rages on with no apparent end in sight. Meanwhile, China and Iran continue to engage in aggressive actions to accomplish their geopolitical goals.

Behind the headlines, though, atrocities against Christians occur daily with little global outcry. Countries such as Nigeria and Pakistan have been identified as places with extreme persecution. However, in the past few years, other nations are increasingly experiencing attacks against Christians, tragically evident in Mozambique.

For the first time, Mozambique appeared on the Open Doors World Watch List in 2021, ranking number 45 out of the top fifty worst nations for persecution of Christians. In 2022, Mozambique rose to number 41 on

the list^[1], and currently, in 2023, it jumped to 32, representing a dramatic increase in violence over the years.^[2]

This marked escalation of violence against Christians in Mozambique is worthy of investigation. Much of the violence has been attributed to the ISIS-affiliated Islamist group al-Sunnah wa Jama'ah (ASJ), also known as ISIS-Mozambique (IS-M), which emerged in 2017. ASJ is thought to be responsible for more than 3,100 deaths and the displacement of more than 800,000 people.^[3]

According to an article published by the UN in October 2022, over one million people have fled the Cabo Delgado province, where most of the violence is concentrated. A UN official reported, "People have witnessed their loved ones being killed, beheaded, and raped, and their houses and other infrastructure burned to the ground. Men and boys have also been forcibly enrolled in armed groups. Livelihoods have been lost, and education stalled while access to necessities such as food and healthcare has been hampered. Many people have been re-traumatized after being

forced to move multiple times to save their lives.”^[4] There are hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people living in camps, churches and schools have been burned as villages are attacked, and drug cartels continue to add violence to the ongoing extremism.^[5]

In addition, Mozambique also has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. Christian girls are especially vulnerable and forced to convert to Islam. Girls as young as seven have been forced to marry or live with someone as though they are married, leaving them scarred with shame and stigma.^[6] It is estimated that 20 percent of girls ages 13 to 17 are impacted. Some programs operated by the UN and/or other humanitarian organizations have been developed to assist them in escaping and becoming self-sufficient.^[7]

The violent attacks have spread from Cabo Delgado into the neighboring northern provinces of Nampula and Niassa as well as neighboring Tanzania, where thousands more have fled. The UNHCR is providing humanitarian assistance, but it is woefully inadequate, given the worsening and ongoing violence. As a result, the US Embassy in Tanzania has issued a warning to US citizens to be very cautious in high-risk areas.^[8]

On March 10, 2021, the US State Department designated ISIS-Mozambique (ASJ) as a terrorist organization.^[9] In

addition, on August 6, 2021, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken officially designated IS-M leaders Bonomade Machude Omar and Ibn Omaras “Specially Designated Global Terrorists” under Executive Order 13224. This designation freezes all assets and blocks financial transactions with these individuals.^[10] While the Mozambican government leaders have blamed “external terrorists” such as al-Shabbab for the violence, they have downplayed the role of IS-M. The IS-M organization has grown in strength and brutality as it has broadened its international ties. They finance their operation with illicit activities, including extortion and kidnapping.^[11] Their goal is to establish a regional Islamic caliphate, and their intent is seen in widespread violence.^[12]

As a result, in 2021, the international community, including the US, responded by sending soldiers,

equipment, and military advisors to assist the weak government forces to fight the insurgents. “These combined forces have succeeded in retaking control of some areas of Cabo Delgado, but it will probably take a long time to quell the insurgency altogether, given its ability to hide in rural areas and continue threatening civilians and government forces in towns along the coast, which is also the base of operations for the budding Mozambican natural-gas industry.” Some terrorism is driven by economic factors, motivated by a desire to control natural resources.

In addition to international military assistance, humanitarian ministries such as Iris Global are on the ground serving those displaced and traumatized. According to Heidi Baker, Co-Founder and President of Iris Global, based in Pema, Mozambique: “What began in 2017 as a seemingly random incident of iso-

lated aggression in a town in northern Mozambique has deteriorated into a protracted and increasingly sophisticated campaign of terror. It has spread throughout the province of Cabo Delgado and threatens more people every day.”^[13] Iris Global provides basic physical needs such as food, shelter, and water, plus the transformative love of Jesus. The organization partners with the UN and other relief organizations serving 30,000 people, coordinating with local churches and feeding sites. They have witnessed several pastors, friends, and family brutally murdered and churches burned. While they grieve, the work continues. It is daunting, and the level of trauma is pronounced. Yet, Heidi states: “We are believing for the strength and resources to increase our capacity to reach more people with the tangible love of Jesus.”^[14] We pray in agreement. ✝

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War on Christians in Democratic Republic of Congo

By Linda Burkle, Ph.D.

Fifteen years ago, I visited the DRC as one of a three-person contingency of U.S. officials representing an international religious organization. We had a twofold mission: encourage Christians in the DRC and check on local projects funded by the U.S. church. We visited a school for the blind and other projects and dedicated a generator. We also spoke at church gatherings and seminars. I had the privilege of “preaching” at a church opening and conducting several women’s ministry seminars throughout the country. Thousands attended; the church denomination was one of the largest in the country. While it was reported that the country had been subject to instability due to corruption, clan oppression, and regional conflict, there was no indication that there was widespread persecution of Christians by terrorist groups during our visit.

But that has changed; with the growth of multiple Islamic extremist and rebel groups perpetrating violence, coupled with an ineffective, complicit, and/or corrupt government, Christians in the DRC are suffering from unprecedented persecution. This phenomenon is not limited to the DRC but is occurring in neighboring sub-Saharan African countries as well.

Recently, International Christian Concern (ICC) reported that during ten days in April, eighty Christians were killed and hundreds abducted in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The atrocities were perpetrated by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), one of many extremist Islamic groups targeting Christians while seeking to establish Islamic law throughout the region. ICC reported, “For decades, the ADF has killed, maimed, abducted, and displaced millions of people in North Kivu despite the presence of peacekeepers and local and regional troops in the troubled region.”

While such attacks are not new to the area, they are becoming more frequent and violent. This year Open Doors World Watch List ranked DRC as 37 of the fifty worst countries persecuting Christians. DRC appeared on the WWL for the first time in 2021, when it was ranked number 40. These rising designations reflect a dramatic increase in the persecution occurring in the DRC.

Although ninety-five percent of the population are Christians, their presence is diminishing in regions terrorized by the ADF and over one hundred other armed groups. The ADF is most active in Ituri province and North Kivu in eastern DRC, where Christians are targeted with impunity.

Christian villages are raided, churches are burned, and Christians are abducted and brutally killed if they refuse to recant their faith and convert to Islam. Women and girls are raped and forced to marry the perpetrators. Many Christians have fled to safer areas. “Prior to the outbreak of violence, one church denomination had 25 churches in the Beni area; today, they have eight. Another denomination had 54 churches and now have 11. Other denominations report similar patterns.”

The international community has voiced alarm at the widespread violent attacks occurring in eastern DRC. A senior U.N. human rights official, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ilze Brands Kehris, traveled to the region in February 2023, visiting camps of internally displaced refugees and meeting with civil and military leaders. However, while she referenced ethnic groups being victimized, she omitted any reference to religious groups such as Islamic extremists or Christians. Kehri observed the “deteriorating security situation in the east of the country, where the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23) and various other armed groups, including the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO) and Zaire, continue to engage in brutal attacks against civilians. Documented human rights violations and abuses include mass killings, mutilations, and conflict-related sexual violence, causing massive displacement and enduring trauma.” She concluded, “I strongly condemn these appalling attacks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and echo the Secretary-General’s call last weekend for ‘action for peace’ in Africa. The violence must stop. I also strongly encourage the authorities to redouble their efforts to counter rising hatred and implement targeted initiatives to promote trust and cohesion within and between communities,” she said.

Despite the deep and longstanding U.S. relations with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the State Department has ignored religious persecution specifically while focusing on more generalized topics which impact religious persecution: “combat corruption, uphold democratic processes and effective governance, promote stability and peace within the country and with its neighbors, improve security and justice institutions to strengthen state authority, ensure accountability for human rights abuses and violations.” The U.S. is DRC’s largest bilateral donor and largest financial contributor to the U.N. Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO). Despite these factors, the U.S. State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom’s recent reports highlighting persecution have omitted any reference to the DRC or any of the terrorist groups operating within its borders. Moreover, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan body created to monitor religious freedom internationally and advise the U.S. State Department, did not reference the DRC nor designate it as a country of concern in recent annual reports.

One could conclude that while some NGOs are raising the alarm regarding the religious persecution occurring in the DRC, governmental entities seem to be avoiding the topic. In the meantime, Christians are suffering horrific persecution in DRC. I often think of those I met while there; questions arise in my mind: Are they safe, alive, displaced, or victims of horrific attacks? I may never know. ✝



HUMANITARIAN CRISIS LINGERS FOR ARMENIAN CHRISTIANS

By Linda Burkle, Ph.D.

With many conflicts globally, most prominently the Russian war on Ukraine, there has been little attention given to the present plight of Armenian Christians living in a disputed region referred to as the Republic of Artsakh.

Decades long fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan resulted in ethnic Armenians being in control of this breakaway region and seven surrounding districts within Azerbaijan. During the 2020 war, however, Azerbaijan regained control of all adjacent districts and territory within Nagorno-Karabakh, which is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.

In November 2020, Russia brokered a peace deal that included having 2,000 Russian peacekeepers patrolling the area, which is jointly monitored with Turkey, a longtime Azerbaijani ally.

Current Blockade

Since December 12, 2022, government supported Azerbaijani protestors posing as environmentalists, have blocked the Lachin Corridor, the sole Nagorno-Karabakh land link vital to providing supplies to 120,000 ethnic Armenians living in the mountainous region.

Only the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Russian peacekeepers have been allowed to pass. However, Azerbaijani has installed military checkpoints making it difficult for even the ICRC to transport patients needing medical care.

The protestors, called “ecoactivists” include civilian workers, students, and disguised military. The Azerbaijani government supplies tents, food, and incentives for taking part in the blockade. Some are paid and flown from other areas. They contend that the Armenians are running “illegal” ore mines in Karabakh and demand access for inspection.

The Armenian authorities “have rejected the protesters’ demands as a gross violation of the Russian-brokered agreement from November 2020 that suspended more than a month of intense fighting in the decades-old Armenian-Azerbaijani war over the Azerbaijani territory

of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding districts".

The ongoing blockade has created a humanitarian crisis, denying basic needs such as food, energy, access to medical care, school, and internet services to the those living in the region. Grocery shelves are bare, food is rationed, and medical conditions are not being treated.

In addition, since the blockade began, Azerbaijan has cut off the only gas supply intermittently and damaged infrastructure. Since March 22, 2023, Artsakh has been without a gas supply. The region has also been forced to rely on its own limited production of electricity. The only power line supplying Artsakh was damaged, and Azerbaijan has prevented its repair. Artsakh authorities have resorted to daily 6-hour blackouts to rationing the remaining supply of electricity production.

As the months wear on, the Armenian government has accused the Azerbaijani government of genocide due to starvation. "Azerbaijan has now cut off all shipments of food, fuel, and other critical supplies to the breakaway territory of Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia." . . . "This genocide does not feature crematories or machete attacks. Rather, the blockade of food, oil, medicine, and other essential goods to a protected group should be considered a genocide under Article II (c) of the Genocide Convention, which addresses 'Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction.'"

To end the blockade, Azerbaijan has presented two options to Artsakh: submit to Baku (Azerbaijan's Capitol) government rule or the blockade continues, causing continued untold deprivation and suffering. The Armenians have flatly rejected the proposal. "How can we accept humanitarian aid from the country that has led us to this disaster? It is using one

hand to strangle us and the other hand to feed us," said the territory's de facto president, Arayik Harutyunyan, in a July 24 live-streamed press conference.

Threat of Genocide

On July 28, 2023, Armenian Ambassador to the UN Mher Margaryan sent a letter to the UN Security Council asking for an emergency meeting, saying the situation was "on the verge of a full-fledged humanitarian catastrophe" and urging international intervention to prevent genocide. He accused Azerbaijan of blocking the Lachin Corridor where trucks carrying 400 tons of humanitarian aid were denied passage. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan leaders insist that the road is open for humanitarian cargo, emergency services, and peacekeepers.

Thomas Becker, a Senior Clinical Supervisor at the University Network for Human Rights, has made three fact-finding trips to Armenia within the last year. He and his team from Yale and Harvard documented bombings of buildings, homes, and other sites. He said, "Perhaps most unsettling were the videos we were shown by a woman who fled her village of Azerbaijani soldiers beheading and mutilating the bodies of her neighbors. Azerbaijan's preparation, persecution, dehumanization, and denial—each considered a "stage" of genocide—has prompted Genocide Watch to issue a genocide warning about Armenians under attack by Azerbaijan. Others in the global community, including the United States, have also expressed alarm."

Becker noted that the Armenians have endured "decapitations, sexual mutilation, cultural destruction, dehumanizing statements by authorities, and a constant threat of attacks—all coming from Azerbaijan, with direct military and economic support from Turkey, the successor nation of the Ottoman Empire"... "what con-

cerned me most on my recent fact-finding trip to Armenia, my third in the last year, is that the rights abuses I had previously witnessed in Nagorno-Karabakh—including indiscriminate killings, torture, and arbitrary detention—are now being carried out by Azerbaijan in sovereign Armenian territory with impunity."

The threat of genocide is very real. "Over the past decade, Azerbaijani officials have invoked language used in the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust, referring to Armenians as a 'cancer tumor' and a 'disease' to be 'treated.' More recently, the country's authoritarian leader Ilham Aliyev has threatened to 'drive [Armenians] away like' dogs' and 'treat' Armenians because they are 'sick' with 'a virus' [that] has permeated them." The Baku government even issued a 2020 commemorative stamp depicting a person in a hazmat suit 'cleansing' Nagorno-Karabakh." Furthermore, Aliyev said the goal is total elimination of Armenians in the region.

International Response

A group of non-governmental and humanitarian organizations, including International Christian Concern (ICC), issued an urgent plea to the international community saying that genocide is a present danger.

"The current Azerbaijani aggression against the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh conforms to a long pattern of ethnic and religious cleansing of Armenian and other Christian communities in the region by the government of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Turkey, the Ottoman Empire, and their partisans. We call on all contracting parties to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Russian Federation, to fulfill their obligations, through the UN Security Council, to prevent another chapter of the Armenian

Genocide."

On January 18, 2023, the European Parliament issued a resolution condemning the blockade and urging Azerbaijan at once "reopen the Lachin corridor to enable free movement and ensure access to essential goods and services, thus guaranteeing security in the region and safeguarding residents' livelihoods." The resolution also called for the unimpeded access of international organizations and the UN to assess the situation and supply necessary humanitarian aid. In addition, it asserted the need for a comprehensive peace agreement, as well as replacement of Russian peacekeepers with international peacekeepers under UN mandate, given the Russian peacekeepers cooperation with the protesters.

The International Court of Justice and the U.S. Department of State also condemned the blockade. In a written statement, the U.S. diplomats warned that the Azerbaijani blockade "sets back the peace process and undermines international confidence" as well as creates "a grave humanitarian situation." The United States has stopped, however, short of imposing any sanctions on Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) is trying to address the needs of displaced Armenians.

On June 29, 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken met with foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan to come to an agreement. The talks are to continue but have made little progress.

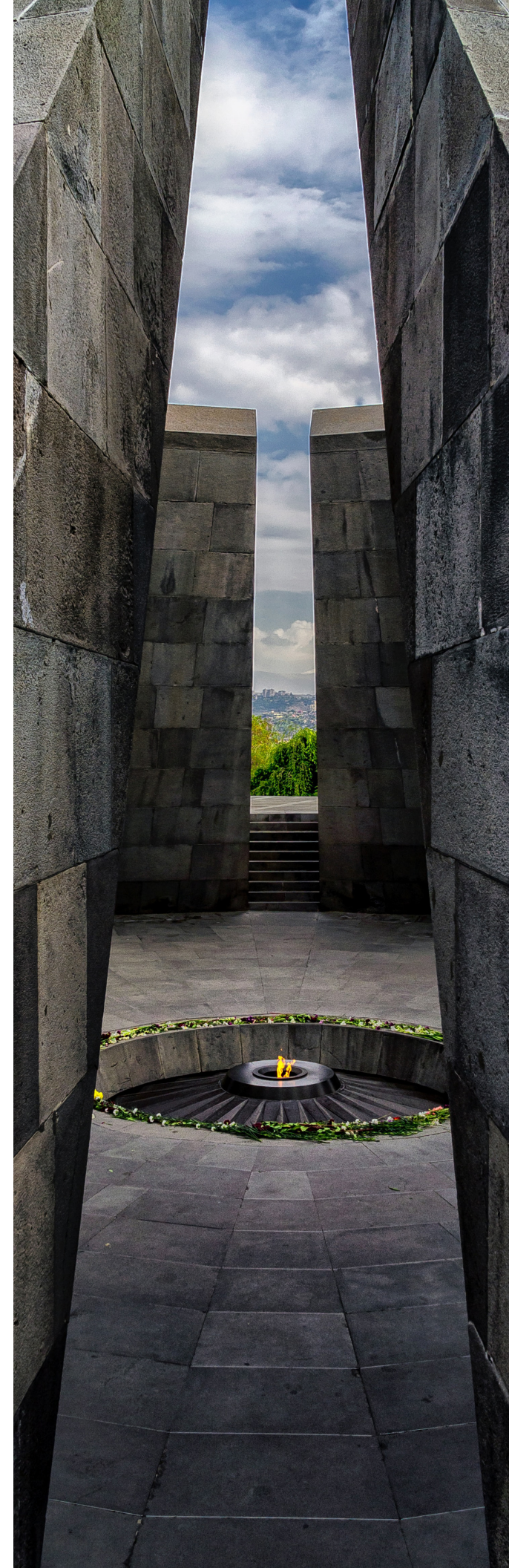
On August 16, 2023, the UN Security Council met with representatives of Armenia and Azerbaijan. With-

out issuing a formal statement, all 15 members called for the reopening of the Lachin Corridor. U.N. humanitarian coordinator Edem Worsornu reported to the council that the International Committee of the Red Cross, has been blocked from transporting food since June 14 and medicine since July 7, in violation of international humanitarian law, requiring all parties to rapidly deliver aid.

Armenia's Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan warned the council that starvation is imminent without "without immediate dramatic change this group of Armenians will be destroyed in a few weeks." He said it was the duty of the Security Council to prevent another genocide. Azerbaijan's U.N. Ambassador Yashar Aliyev responded by "categorically rejecting all unfounded and groundless allegations on (a) blockade or humanitarian crisis propagated by Armenia against my country," accusing the Armenians of provoking a political campaign to undermine Azerbaijan's sovereignty.

Conclusion

Unless there is immediate reopening of the Lachin Corridor and restoration of essential goods and services, undoubtedly more Armenian Christians living in the Republic of Artsakh will die. This is a travesty that cannot be ignored. The international community must impose sanctions and treat this blockade as an act of genocide. Meanwhile, International Christian Concern implores all Christians to pray for those suffering and contact their respective government officials to urge action. ✝



POST-ELECTION STRESSORS FOR NIGERIA'S CHRISTIAN POPULATION

By Greg Cochran, Ph.D.

As with an engineer thinking through the design of a building or superhighway, so, too, Christians in Nigeria are thinking through what the future holds for their plans to build families and churches in a tense political environment ostensibly worsening with the results of the most recent national election. The combination of political pressure and religious tensions entreats them to identify various stress points, hopefully ensuring these tensions and pressures don't end in fractures and destruction. Thus far, at least three stress points have emerged as key challenges for Christians.

First, Bola Tinubu, a Muslim presidential candidate from the incumbent APC party, was declared the winner, but the election has since been contested. Yiaga Africa, a non-profit organization in Nigeria committed to promoting democratic principles and free elections, noted several irregularities in the recent voting which saw Bola Tinubu elevated to President-elect status without receiving a majority of the votes. Yiaga Africa noted that in some areas voting did not actually happen, while other locations allowed voting into Sunday morning, even though voting closed officially on Saturday night. Similarly, members of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Nigeria observed violence and voter intimidation in Lagos and other places.

These and similar abnormalities produced no less than three major lawsuits contesting the results of the election and calling for varying degrees of remedy—reme-

dies ranging from disqualifying Tinubu to scrapping the entire election and starting fresh with a new one. In addition to pointing out the voting anomalies, these lawsuits claim that Vice President Kashim Shettima is not qualified; that required majority vote thresholds were not met; and that voting tabulations were not available electronically as required by law.

According to Nigeria's legal code, these lawsuits must be ruled upon within 180 days of filing. Meanwhile, Lai Mohammed, Nigeria's Minister of Information, has stated that President Tinubu will take office as scheduled on May 29 this year. How long will these lawsuits hamstring Bola Tinubu's administration? Of course, no one knows, but the language thus far points in the direction of strained relationships for months if not years. Members of the three political parties have been accusing one another of undemocratic, unpatriotic, or even treasonous actions thus far in the chaos following these contested elections. These heated charges indicate ongoing stress which will take time to heal.

For Christians, these charges expose a major stress point between the Christian commitment to justice and the admonition of Romans 13 to be in subjection to governing authorities. If Christians sense a growing unease with Tinubu's government on account of perceived injustices in his being elected, then the danger of shearing off into rejection or even rebellion increases. Stress levels remain elevated for now.

Second, the election of Tinubu and the APC ticket broke



a decades-long tradition of inclusion. Prior to this election, Muslim presidential candidates have chosen Christians for the vice president office, while Christian presidential candidates have selected Muslim running mates. Tinubu intentionally transgressed this unwritten rule, stoking Christian fears by selecting the Muslim former governor of Borno state, Kashim Shettima.

Even before Shettima was announced as the vice-presidential candidate, Christians were nervous about the prospect of a straight Muslim ticket: "Already Christians are being killed even though two Muslims are not running Nigeria. Imagine how bad it will be if we have two Muslims in power?" said Rev. Bayo Oladeji, a spokesman for the Christian Association of Nigeria, when questioned in January about the possibility of a single-faith ticket. Oladeji's sentiment has now metastasized into anxiety among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Baptists, and other Christian denominations, creating a stress point regarding the balance of power in Nigeria.

As a counterbalance to the angst of this single-faith leadership, political pundits have proffered multiple mitigating considerations. Many praise Tinubu's liberal acceptance of Christians both privately and publicly. He is married to a Christian woman, Oluremi Tinubu, a woman ordained into ministry by the Redeemed Christian Church of God, one of the fastest growing Pentecostal churches in Nigeria.

Likewise, the election results themselves have been mentioned as an additional counterbalance to Tinubu's choice of a Muslim vice president. Though Tinubu has been announced as the winner of the election, his victory is perhaps, as Max Siollun notes, a pyrrhic victory. Voter turnout was extremely low. The president-elect received only 36% of the votes, meaning 64% of Nigerians who voted cast their ballots for someone other than Tinubu and the incumbent APC party. Will the Muslim leadership moderate in an effort to unify the population?

While these efforts to placate the stress of a single-religion rule are understandable, such placating has accomplished precious little thus far. The forsaking of a Christian presence in top leadership continues to be a major stressor. Perhaps the reason is explained by Ekwutosi E. Offiong and Charles E. Ekpo, who, in a recent journal article, argue that Nigeria is not rightly called a Secular state. Rather, they conclude, "The implication... is that efforts by the government to appease these religious forces by maintaining equilibrium has culminated in institutional and structural reforms that have transformed

the country's political orientation, by action, to a theocratic diarchy amidst the aura of secularism."

While the point the authors are making is that Nigeria is not rightly called a secular state, the implication is clear: Nigeria is a two-religion state, a "theocratic diarchy." If this appellation is accurate, the gravity of one-religion leadership lands with enough weight to cause Nigerians in general and Christians in particular to ponder this severe disturbance in the political force. This disturbance represents the loss of political equilibrium. Has the diarchy been dissolved forever? Time will tell if this shift is an anomaly or a new normal, but the tension for the moment remains.

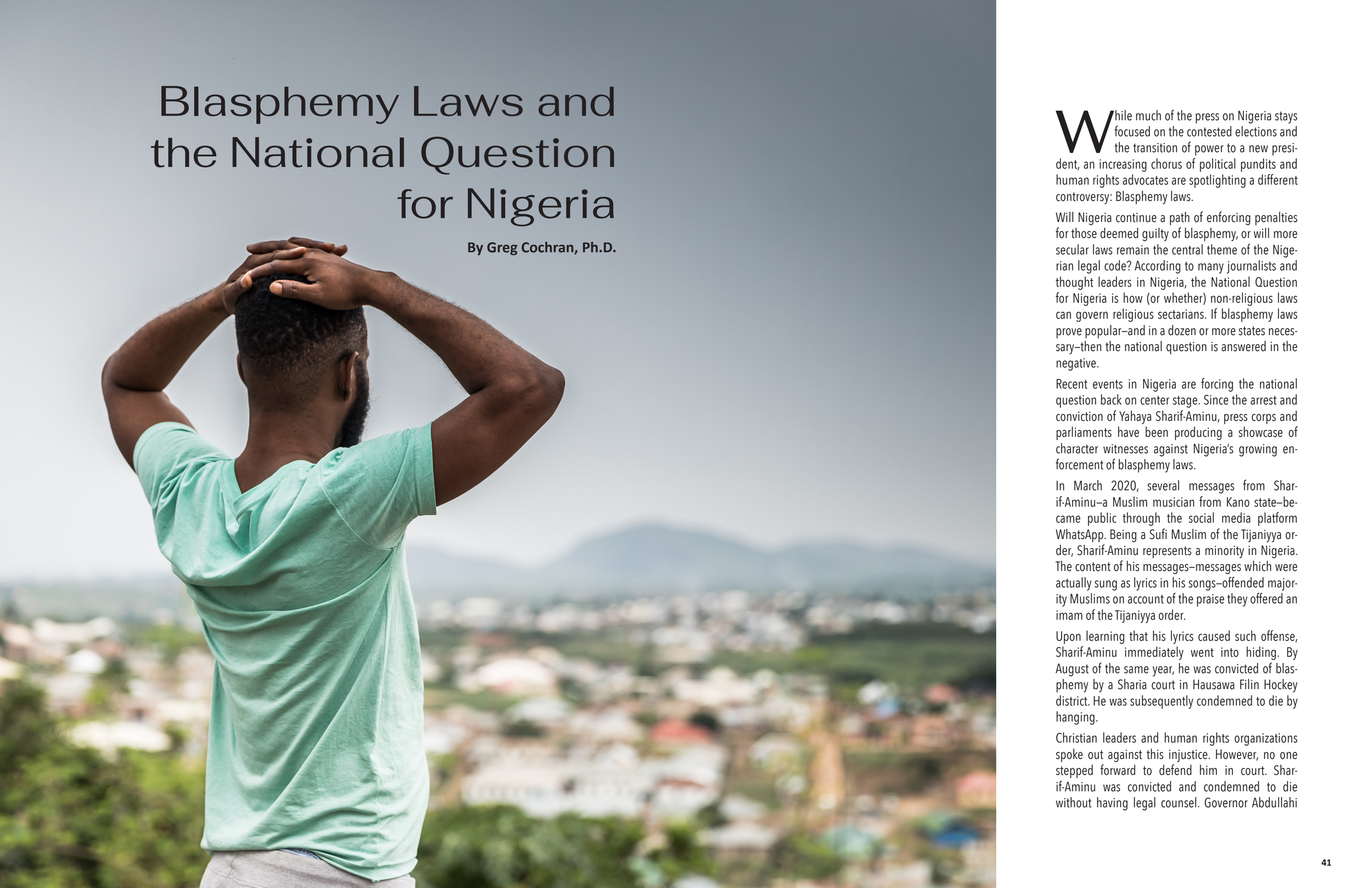
In engineering terms, this stress point would be somewhat akin to torsion, a stress in which the pressure of being twisted might wreak havoc over time. For Christians in Nigeria this torsion represents the existential twists of living under Muslim leadership while walking daily in the direction of another king.

Third, the stress of ongoing violence promotes fatigue among Nigeria's Christian populations. When President Muhammadu Buhari of the APC party was elected in 2015, he promised to eradicate Boko Haram and its terrorist threat. By his 2021 Democracy Day address, Buhari admitted to his people that he had failed to end insecurity in the country.

While Boko Haram has morphed and splintered over the past eight years, violence in the country has never waned—particularly violence against Christian populations. Christians for these past eight years have heard promises and reassurances, both from President Buhari and from his Christian Vice President, Yemi Osinbajo. Violence has persisted. Just a couple of weeks before the election, nearly 100 villagers were killed in Kankara, Katsina State. In addition to carrying out kidnappings, rapes, forced marriages, and beatings, Boko Haram has killed more than 35,000 people in northern Nigeria since its founding in 2009. An additional 1.8 million Nigerians remain internally displaced in the northeastern states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe.

Will fatigue triumph as Christians contemplate the reality of the same APC party leading national affairs, yet this time without a Christian presence in a top executive post? Again, time will tell, but the present stress is heavy upon Christians to maintain faith in the face of mounting fatigue. As Nigerian Christians strategize for a better future, they will be forced to address these and other stress points. ✝️





Blasphemy Laws and the National Question for Nigeria

By Greg Cochran, Ph.D.

While much of the press on Nigeria stays focused on the contested elections and the transition of power to a new president, an increasing chorus of political pundits and human rights advocates are spotlighting a different controversy: Blasphemy laws.

Will Nigeria continue a path of enforcing penalties for those deemed guilty of blasphemy, or will more secular laws remain the central theme of the Nigerian legal code? According to many journalists and thought leaders in Nigeria, the National Question for Nigeria is how (or whether) non-religious laws can govern religious sectarians. If blasphemy laws prove popular—and in a dozen or more states necessary—then the national question is answered in the negative.

Recent events in Nigeria are forcing the national question back on center stage. Since the arrest and conviction of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, press corps and parliaments have been producing a showcase of character witnesses against Nigeria's growing enforcement of blasphemy laws.

In March 2020, several messages from Sharif-Aminu—a Muslim musician from Kano state—became public through the social media platform WhatsApp. Being a Sufi Muslim of the Tijaniyya order, Sharif-Aminu represents a minority in Nigeria. The content of his messages—messages which were actually sung as lyrics in his songs—offended majority Muslims on account of the praise they offered an imam of the Tijaniyya order.

Upon learning that his lyrics caused such offense, Sharif-Aminu immediately went into hiding. By August of the same year, he was convicted of blasphemy by a Sharia court in Hausawa Filin Hockey district. He was subsequently condemned to die by hanging.

Christian leaders and human rights organizations spoke out against this injustice. However, no one stepped forward to defend him in court. Sharif-Aminu was convicted and condemned to die without having legal counsel. Governor Abdullahi

Ganduje of Kano State voiced his willingness to carry out the execution order after a 30-day hold. Fortunately, Kola Alapinni stepped forward to assist Sharif-Aminu's legal efforts.

Kola Alapinni, a human rights lawyer from Lagos, ascended to a starring role in the musician's drama, filing an appeal within the 30-day hold (on Sept. 1, 2020). Strategically, Alapinni sued both the Attorney General and Governor Ganduje for failure to uphold the laws of Nigeria and failure to secure justice and safety for Sharif-Aminu. The case of this Muslim musician progressed to international prominence and has set the stage for a Supreme Court scene in which Sharif-Aminu's role has been obscured by the bright spotlight shining on the blasphemy law itself.

As the blasphemy law has become the central theme in this tragedy, more supporting cast have joined Alapinni and Sharif-Aminu on stage—singing a single note in harmony: Blasphemy laws are unconstitutional and unconscionable. That's a note Nigerian Christians are singing as well.

The European Parliament produced a brilliant show of support recently, passing a resolution condemning the practice of capital punishment for blasphemy. This resolution accords with most nations, ruling out executions for people due to religious belief (or unbelief). Currently, six nations allow the death penalty for apostasy, while seven additional nations (of which Nigeria is one) allow the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy. The European Union (EU) resolution "recalls that blasphemy laws are in clear breach of international human rights" and "contrary to the Nigerian Constitution which guarantees religious freedom and freedom of expression."

Alapinni posted on LinkedIn that the support received for Sharif-Aminu (against blasphemy laws) was unprecedented: The EU resolution passed with 550 in favor and only seven votes opposed. Clearly, the international community is monitoring this Muslim musician's performance in the court system.

No doubt, Muslim and Christian leaders in Nigeria's government are taking note of the concerns voiced by the European Parliament. As part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Nigeria has a vested interest in harmonious relations with this parliament. The EU is West Africa's biggest trading partner and the primary importer of Nigerian products like fossil fuels, food products, pharmaceutical goods, and machinery. In short, the EU is Nigeria's most important economic partner. EU members of parliament showed no hesitation mentioning the economic issue as each offered a soliloquy condemning the use of blasphemy laws in the African nation. In short, the members of par-

liament are using economic leverage, forcing the national question to be answered in Nigeria: Will historic freedoms be protected under a more secular rule of law, or will parts of Nigeria (or all?) be governed with strict, sectarian laws?

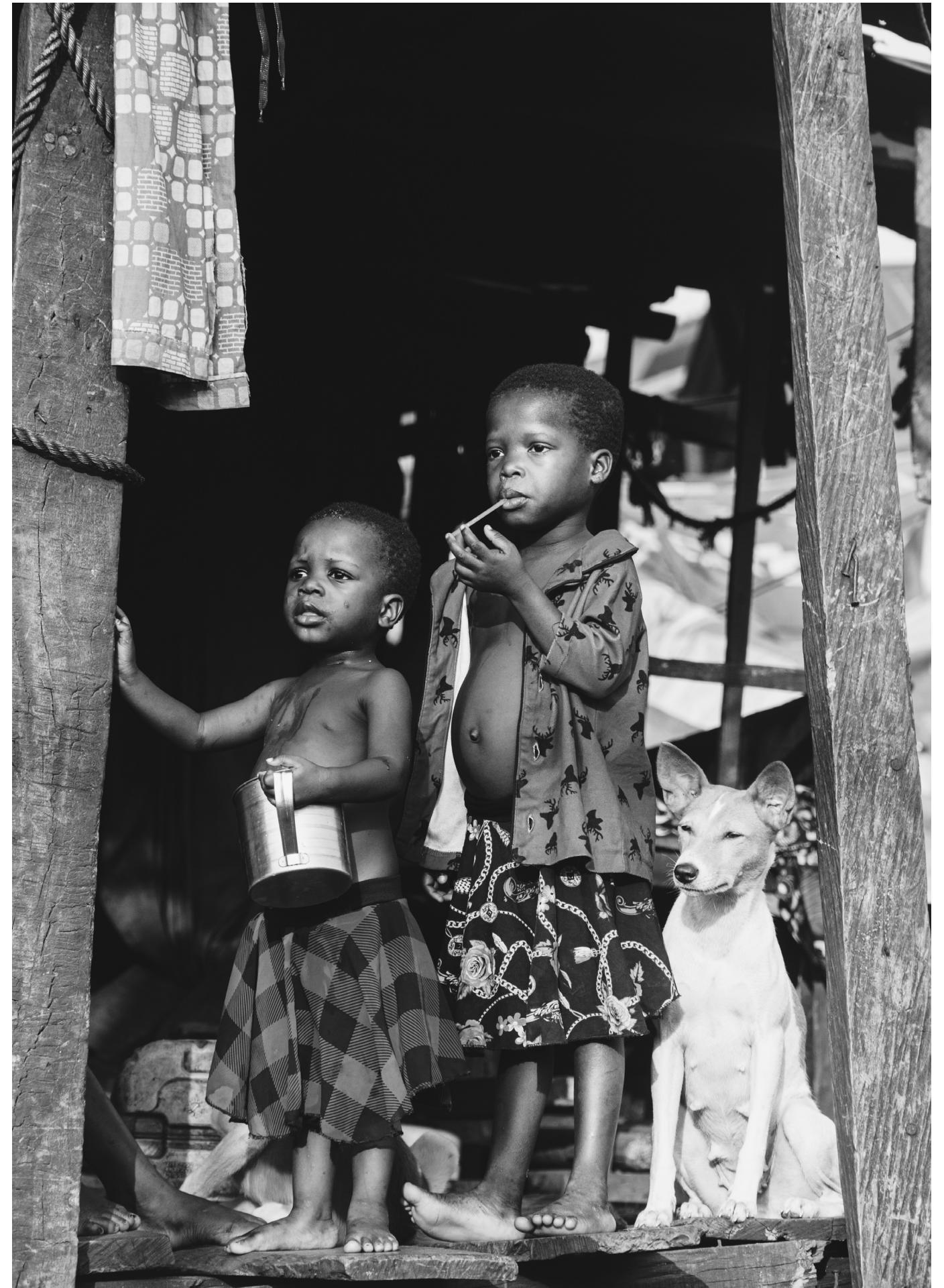
While the economic concern is not insignificant, many Christians in Nigeria view Sharif-Aminu's case more as a more urgent existential crisis. For Christians, these blasphemy laws are merely punctuation—the question mark at the end of the interrogative sentence asking, "the national question."

Christians have been spectators of a steady increase in violence and brazen attacks over the past two decades. Blasphemy laws appear to play a part in this rise of discrimination and persecution against those—especially Christians—who do not follow the majority Muslim rule. Ebenezer Obadare, writing for the Council on Foreign Relations, explains how blasphemy laws increase violence in extrajudicial settings: "For one thing, perpetrators, seemingly secure in the conviction of 'doing God's work,' are further emboldened by the not unreasonable perception that, because of tacit official endorsement of their action, no penalty will accrue for their crime." In fact, in most cases no one faces penalties for violence in connection with blasphemy charges.

For example, in May 2022, Deborah Yakubu—a second year student at a Christian college in Sokoto—was killed by a mob after being accused of blasphemy. Like with Sharif-Aminu, Yakubu's comments appeared on WhatsApp. However, she understood her comments to be part of an academic discussion with a group of students for study purposes, but her motive didn't matter to her accusers. She was discovered while hiding for safety. She was beaten to death with clubs and stones, and her body was burned on the school campus.

Nigerians in general and Christians in particular sense a growing distrust and disunity in the country. For Christians, Sharia law is supposed to be a Muslim concern, enacted mostly in the 12 northern states with Sharia courts. Deborah's case makes plain that Christians remain rightly alarmed by a growing appetite to accuse and kill those perceived of disrespecting Islam. According to SBM Intel, Nigeria has recently been averaging about seven incidents of mob violence per month, killing about ten Nigerians each month in those incidents. Not all these incidents relate to accusations of blasphemy, but some do.

As President-elect Bola Tinubu is set to take office May 29, he will undoubtedly be confronted with the "national question" and expect to offer some answers. Christians, meanwhile, watch as nervous spectators, feeling a little bit left out by having no Christian representative on the presidential stage. ✝



A DEMOGRAPHIC CALL FOR CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT IN NIGERIA

By Greg Cochran, Ph.D.

Recently, an American football player planned to move from one team to another and had to pass a physical examination. For this receiver, however, the formality became an unexpected reality of sobering gravity – the routine physical revealed that he had cancer.

The player's concerns about contracts and negotiations suddenly evaporated under the weight of strategizing for his survival.

Christians in Nigeria may consider watching the formalities of transitioning to a new president with a similar sense of concern for the possibility of an undiagnosed disease.

As President Tinubu takes office in Nigeria, rival parties may investigate weaknesses to exploit. Obvious concerns such as violence in the northern states (including the imposition of blasphemy laws) will provide an arena for press conferences, unlocking opportunities to score political points. In the back-and-forth political games, Christians should work to stay focused on substantial, even eternal, priorities.

What are Christian priorities? Christians may need to ask, "Are there unnoticed concerns we need to be addressing?" A recent study from Andrew McKinnon at the University of Aberdeen suggests an affirmative reply; Christians in Nigeria have a long-term challenge to address. If the demographic trends of the past two decades are true indicators of the next few decades, Christians are in danger of falling to minority status in a Muslim-dominated Nigeria. Here is McKinnon's prognosis:



“Trends presented suggest that the Muslim-identified population is likely on track to have become an absolute majority of Nigerian adults, possibly within a decade with widespread implications, including for electoral politics.”

Dire warnings of demographic demise are not new for Nigerian Christians. Many demographic studies have been produced, debated, kicked around between pundits and political advisors for years. McKinnon’s work is unique in that it aggregates 11 major studies between 1998 and 2018, including four waves of the World Value Survey and five waves of the Afrobarometer survey.

According to his research, the era of Christian growth in Nigeria has ended:

“While Christian identities increased between 1990 and 1995, mirrored by the decline in traditional worship, this is the tail end of proportional growth of Christian identities before the trend starts reversing itself, not because of losses through conversion, but rather because the Muslim-identified population is growing faster. Those who identify as Muslim are growing towards 50% of the population, and those who identify as Christian are shrinking proportionately, towards 50% of the population.”

Given the recent transition to the all-Muslim team of Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shettima, Christians will immediately feel the weight of the implications of such population trends. McKinnon states the obvious conclusion bluntly: “Christians seem unlikely to maintain their place as the

largest religious group in Nigeria for long. The change is demographic, rather than the product of conversions and defections....”

One may certainly question the veracity of McKinnon’s demographic outlook. As noted, demographic studies have been used and abused in Nigeria’s recent history. Accurate data are difficult to discern. As McKinnon notes, the trend of shrinking proportions is not always evident in demographic studies. The primary reason the shrinking goes unnoticed is the propensity of surveys to count only adults (over age 18). McKinnon suggests as much as a 5% overall increase for the population of Muslims if children are included in the total population. For instance, surveys from 2010 may show Muslims at 42% of the population. Today, however, many of the children who were not counted in 2010 would be over 18.

Taking the number of children into account, the actual percentage of Muslims in Nigeria would be 47%—with the percentage of Christians shrinking proportionately. Muslims are having more children than Christians—especially in the northern states which enforce Shariah law. Nothing in the political climate or recent events indicates that these states will be more open to western birth control techniques. Birthing trends favor Muslims.

Finally, McKinnon asserts multiple times that proselytizing has had zero net effect in either direction. Nigeria is a polarized nation of Christians and Muslims who seem disinterested in switching teams. Throughout the 20th century, massive numbers of religionists abandoned their

traditional religions and joined Muslims—or even more frequently—Christians. That trend seems to have run its course. The small proportion of traditional religionists will play no part in the demographic battle of the coming decades. Muslims are likely to remain Muslims. And Christians will remain Christians.

McKinnon insists that evangelism will not impact the composition of the religious populations:

“We can be sure that neither Muslim nor Christian identities have been making substantial gains over the past 20 years by converting from among those who hold other religious identities or none. There are very few remaining (in proportional terms) others who could be won over to identify with either monotheistic tradition.”

Again, with documentation, McKinnon sees these two religions in an existential conflict for majority control of Nigeria, with the population momentum on the Muslim side:

“The change is demographic, rather than the product of conversions and defections, as the literature provides clear evidence that switching between Christianity and Islam is not a substantial factor in the changing religious composition of Nigeria (Lugo and Cooperman 2010; Stonawski et al 2016; see also Zurlo 2017).”

How might Christians respond to this shift of momentum toward Islam? The same way the American football player responded to his dire prognosis. Re-focus on issues of first importance: Life, love for God, love for others. Christians can handle facts with gravity and sobriety rather than succumbing to a somber de-



spair. Christians also need not retreat to regional, religious, or political tribalism. Christians can maintain both hope and confidence in God’s Great Commission. From the creation of humankind, God gave believers the mandate to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. This mandate obviously includes more than bearing children, but not less. Christians in Nigeria should remain focused on building strong families. Strong families can revitalize and replenish healthy churches, which,

in turn, will contribute to the well-being of thriving communities.

Christians would be helped, too, by remembering where the first commission failed in the Genesis account. The original human pair were to bring forth new humans who would spread the knowledge of God to the ends of the earth. Instead, they stopped thinking of the spread of God’s fame and looked upward in a fit of self-exaltation—reaching up for more power, which was never theirs to possess. When believers look

up to exalt self and increase God-like power, they lose sight of the God-empowered Great Commission to fill the earth with the knowledge of God.

Regardless of demographic trends, the Great Commission calls Christians outward to the task of evangelism and discipleship of all nations. This prognosis is nothing more than a reminder of the need to confidently and lovingly embrace the Great Commission to make disciples in Nigeria and to the ends of the earth. ✝

ESSENTIAL PERCEPTIONS IN NIGERIA'S HERDER FARMER CONFLICT

By Greg Cochran, Ph.D.



What does coffee have in common with violence in Nigeria? Not much. But one similarity comes to mind. Consider the following facts about America's number one beverage. In 2021, consumers spent more than \$6 billion on liquid coffee, and consumption is expected to increase another 33% by 2029.

Part of the increase is due to the proliferation of coffee drinks. Far from the dark, watery liquid served in white Styrofoam cups, coffee has morphed into a luxury item describing everything from high-tech espresso in tiny demitasse cups to parfait-like confections of whipped cream with caramel ribbons. Regardless of the seemingly endless iterations of syrups and creams, one essential ingredient abides intact in each one of these caffeine-laden concoctions: coffee! Coffee drinks may prove to be much more than coffee, but they are never less.

In the same way, violence in Nigeria enjoys wide-ranging expressions, but for Christians it is never without a religious root. As the essence of coffee drinks is coffee, so, too, the essence of violence against Christians is religion; this is the prevailing Christian perception. Consider the violent clashes between herders and farmers. A growing consensus fears that the Fulani herders have killed more Nigerians than Boko Haram, with estimates as high as 7,400 Christians killed since 2015.

In media accounts, the conflict is described as farmers against herders. Experts invoke various causes to explain the violence: ethnic strife, Saharan desertification, climate change, food insecurity, globalization, terrorism, immigration, and criminal activity. Like the whipped cream and chocolate syrups topping popular coffee drinks, these factors exist and play a part in the overall mix of explaining violent clashes between herders and farmers. Nevertheless, none of these ingredients captures the essence of the conflict. According to Christians in Nigeria, religion does. For Christians, conflict between herders and farmers might be more than a religious clash with Muslims, but it is never less.

The reason the Muslim dynamic controls Christian interpretations of the Herder-Farmer conflicts is simple: Attacks against Christian farmers are always carried out by radical Muslims. An outsider might wish to train Christians in Nigeria to think more broadly about the attacks, understanding them to be stressors connected to the climate or to globalization or immigration. Such retraining of Christian thinking is unlikely to succeed so long as Muslims continue carrying out the attacks.

An article in the UK Telegraph made this same point five years ago:

"But whatever the motivation, the conflict is increasingly being perceived as one between Muslims and Christians, a view only reinforced by an attack on a church in Benue state in April when two priests and 17 of their congregation were killed as they said Mass. That attack has had a profound effect on Nigeria's Christians, persuading many, justifiably or otherwise, that the Fulanis' real intent is dispossession, territorial acquisition and the expansion of Islam – all to be achieved by the ethnic cleansing of Christians."

The Christian belief has further galvanized in the five years since this attack, which leads to a question: Is the Christian perception justifiable? The answer might be yes. Far from being irrational zealots or hyper-sensitized

victims, Christians in Nigeria own a tragic abundance of evidence demanding their interpretation be taken seriously.

When the Telegraph ran the article about the 2018 church attack in Benue State, the newspaper presented the matter as a continuation of the age-old conflict between cattle ranchers and farmers. They further emphasized the role of climate change causing herders to retreat into the middle belt and even further into Christian areas—clearly framing the portrait as one of land scarcity and food insecurity. Yet even in that article, two interpretive keys supporting the Christian perception emerged. First, the reporter noted that not all the Fulani attackers owned cattle. Second, the article included this quote:

"The reverend fathers were not farmers," said Samuel Ortom, Benue State's Christian governor. "They were not in the farm. The church where they were holding the Mass had no grass."

"The armed herdsmen have moved the narrative of the current crisis from search for grass to other obvious motives."

Even while framing the attack as part of the prevailing narrative of land scarcity and climate change, the Telegraph article could not prevent the Christian perception from leaching through. In the five years since that article was written, only more evidence has surfaced with similar threads which render the controlling narrative (land scarcity) dubious.

For example, just this past April a mass burial was held for 33 Christians killed during an attack against Runji Village in the Zangon Kataf LGA of Kaduna State. A Fulani militia was implicated in the attacks, which happened late on a Saturday night without reference to cows or grass. In the attacks, a five-year-old boy was beheaded. How does beheading a little boy alleviate grass shortages for cows or counter the effects of climate change? This incident—like many others—makes sense when the Christian interpretation is allowed a hearing. ✝



Of course, violence against non-farming Christians by non-herding Muslims isn't the only evidence Christians put forward in support of their narrative. Government response to the violence has confused Christian farmers—if not caused them utterly to despair. Stories abound nationwide about government ineffectiveness on the herder-farmer clashes (see [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)). At best, the government response has been tepid and ineffective. At worse, the government has been accused of being complicit in the violence.

The accusations grew particularly acute after the election of President Buhari in 2015. An ethnic Fulani himself, Buhari has often been accused of treating Fulani attackers with “kid gloves.” Whether this characterization is true or false is less relevant now that Bola Tinubu has replaced Buhari, but Tinubu is a Muslim and a member of the same political party (APC) as Buhari. Beliefs will not change quickly or easily. And feelings most certainly will not change with inactivity against the violence. But perceptions can change.

Researching for the Berlin Social Science Center, Daniel Tuki agrees that “herder-farmer conflicts catalyze the process of resource conflicts turning religious.” What he means by this

is that the root conflict is not religious, but land scarcity; however, the experience of violence seems to have turned the interpretation of the conflicts to religion. The Fulani attackers become representative of Muslims in general (not unlike Boko Haram or ISWAP).

To be clear, Tuki believes the conflict at root is one of land scarcity (“resource conflicts”). Yet he concludes, “Christians and Muslims do not view pastoral conflicts from the same perspective; the former group is more likely to ascribe pastoral conflicts to a religious cause.” Tuki acknowledges the evidence bearing on the Christian interpretation, as he notes, “When culprits are not brought to book, this erodes institutional trust...”

From his research, Tuki calls for remedies closely aligned to the remedies proposed by the International Crisis Group. This group proposes five steps to avoid further violence and promote peace:

1. Bolster security for farmers and herders, meaning a show of force responding rapidly to calls of distress. In addition, this recommendation includes disarming ethnic militias and vigilantes. Christians would push for

the disarming of radical Fulanis carrying AK47's into villages a point of contention with the Buhari administration.

2. End impunity, meaning holding each person accountable who takes part in violence—particularly violence against innocent actors such as church (or mosque) goers and five-year-old boys, whether Muslim or Christian.
3. Implement the new National Livestock Transformation Plan, encouraging buy-in from herders and state governments.
4. Freeze enforcement of and reform state anti-grazing legislation. Here, the International Crisis Group is calling for a suspension of controversial prohibitions against grazing in Benue state, helping herders become ranchers, diminishing the need for nomadic roaming.
5. Encourage herder-farmer dialogues and support local peace efforts.

Of course, these recommendations would not be imme-

diately easy to implement nor quickly agreed upon by either farmers or herders. For Christians, however, implementing the first two recommendations would go a long way toward rebuilding institutional trust. Christians would not be out of line if they insisted upon the condemnation of violent attacks against churches and children—and the prosecution of those carrying out the attacks—before agreeing to any sort of land allotments or grazing rights to the herders. This sounds controversial, but when is beheading a five-year-old boy ever an acceptable form of action?

If Tuki and others are correct in saying that the essence of the conflict is really resources and not religion, then the condemnation and elimination of gross violence should be a reciprocal commitment for Christians and Muslims alike. Likewise, the prosecution of those engaging in such terrible acts against humanity should be a collective aim that both religions could jointly secure. If such unity proved successful in rooting out the atrocities, then further agreement might be reached on the matter of what is the essential ingredient of the herder-farmer conflict. ✝

NIGERIA'S TRAJECTORY: A Dynamic Dance of Power and Volatility

By Greg Cochran, Ph.D.

One of my grandsons has a fascination with volcanoes. He has amassed a small library of volcano literature. What is it about volcanoes that captivates the imagination of a rambunctious boy? More than likely, two aspects of volcanoes keep him mentally and emotionally engaged: their power and their volatility. The power of volcanoes is well documented through photographs of spewing lava, as well as through observations of the ancient city of Pompeii—a city both destroyed and (ironically) preserved by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius nearly 2,000 years ago. The volatility of volcanoes is evidenced by their abiding unpredictability. Even against an army of seismologists, volcanologists, geologists, and an impressive supply of advanced equipment, volcanoes remain unpredictable. Volcanoes are as volatile as they are powerful.

In like fashion to my grandson, many adults—economists, political pundits, and sociologists—are captivated by power and volatility. Areas of volatile human activity seize their affections and demand their attention. Sure, natural wonders like volcanoes excite the adult imagination, too. But adults often

prefer learning how to possess power and wield it to their own advantage. Such wielding of power inevitably produces volatility. So, powerful people and powerful nations become as volatile and unpredictable as volcanoes, erupting seemingly out of nowhere but always according to their nature.

Given its history of power and its present volatility, Nigeria is attracting volcano-like attention. Nigeria has been called “the giant of Africa.” Nigeria’s economy is number one on the continent of Africa. Yet, Nigeria ranks number six in the world on the Open Doors annual list of countries with the most intense persecution (least religious freedom). Nigeria is a nation whose promise is as powerful as its political climate is volatile.

The power of Nigeria was on display recently in the response to the junta coup in nearby Niger. So far, the most promising efforts toward a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Niger have been centered in the ECOWAS peace delegation. ECOWAS, of course, is the acronym used by the Economic Community of West African States, a collaboration of nation-states empowered by the Treaty of Lagos [Nigeria] in May 1975. Since then, ECOWAS has grown into

much more than an economic community, even marshaling military forces to intervene in civil strife of member nations. In addition to serving as the cradle of ECOWAS since its inception, Nigeria has continually guided the organization through its growth, serving in the role of ECOWAS Chair nine times, which is twice as often as any other nation.

The current chair of ECOWAS is, of course, President Bola Tinubu of Nigeria. As in his home country of Nigeria, so, too, in the ECOWAS collaboration, President Tinubu will be forced to navigate the use of ECOWAS power in conjunction with the volatility it provokes across West Africa and the Sahel. ECOWAS first used military force in its successful campaign to restore peace in Liberia in 1990. ECOWAS has since intervened militarily six additional times, the most recent being Operation Restore Democracy in the Gambia in 2017.

The fact that ECOWAS has intervened successfully in other African nations is a clear indication that the group may successfully intervene in Niger. However, with power comes the potential for volatility. Niger has partnered with two other African nations to forestall any

ECOWAS military intervention. At this point, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have established a security pact called the Alliance of Sahel States:

“I have today signed with the Heads

of State of Burkina Faso and Niger the Liptako-Gourma charter establishing the Alliance of Sahel States, with the aim of establishing a collective defense and mutual assistance frame-

work,” Mali junta leader Assimi Goita said on his X (formerly Twitter) social media account.

The situation in West Africa and across the Sahel has become more volatile.



Member nations of the Alliance of Sahel States have pledged to take up arms in defense of any of the three-member nations if ECOWAS (or anyone else presumably) intervenes militarily. Nigeria will play a key role

in the region, demonstrating both the nation’s power and the region’s volatility—thus attracting no small amount of the world’s attention.

In political affairs, military affairs, and economic affairs, Nigeria has been the

bedrock nation of ECOWAS. Nigeria’s economy makes up 70% of the GDP of countries in ECOWAS. Likewise, Nigeria has the strongest military in the region, with more than 135,000 troops to serve a fully stocked Air

Force and Navy. In addition, Nigeria has about 37 billion barrels of oil reserves. No other country in ECOWAS approaches Nigeria's primacy for projecting power in the region.

Since decolonization, Nigeria has risen against the odds to this preeminence of power while remaining steadily buoyed by political and economic stability. But power can produce volatility. And recently, Nigeria's power has been sliding toward volatility. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Nigeria deserves to be listed among the most egregious violators of religious freedom. Indeed, the USCIRF reaffirmed in May (2023) the need to "designate Nigeria as a 'country of particular concern,' or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)."

According to analysts at Economic Intelligence, Nigeria is slouching continuously toward volatility. Far from being a buoy of economic and political stability for West Africa and the Sahel, Nigeria is now becoming a net exporter of violence and instability. As the analysts note,

"The increasing ungovernability of the country's peripheral regions means that Nigeria has become an exporter of instability in West Africa, and the need to reserve the country's military to address internal security threats means that Nigeria's role as a regional hegemon is much diminished, although its economic size relative to its neighbours still allows it enormous influence within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), West Africa's most important bloc."

So the two themes continue to dance together as the sound of Nigeria's potential for political leadership plays in the background of world affairs like music in a crowded mall. The potential for power



remains. The volatility is increasing. The world is watching. Various world leaders will no doubt attempt to cut in on the dance for their own agenda-driven reasons. What does the future hold for Nigeria?

In many ways, that question is impossible to answer. Only God is able to declare the end from the beginning! But these abiding truths will remain for the foreseeable future: Nigeria will retain much of its power. Nigeria's power will increase the region's volatility. Economists, pundits, and other people watchers will be judging the quality of Nigeria's dance between power and volatility.

Nigeria's future potential for power is great. Missiologist Patrick Johnstone, writing for Lausanne, points out significant trends across Africa and, more particularly, the Sahel region. Johnstone notes that while most nations are aging, many African nations have birth rates so high that the populations are getting younger, not older. Johnstone says,

"By 2050, Africa's population will be 1.4 billion and 2 out of every 5 children in the world will be African. Of the 20 countries in the world with the highest population growth, 19 are in Africa and 14 in the Sahel itself. Niger has the highest birthrate of any nation."

Considering population alone, the Sahel region might be the youngest, most populous region on earth just three decades from now. Will Nigeria unite—Muslims and Christians together—and continue the tradition of being the seat of power and stability for West Africa and the Sahel? Or, will the volatility of Islamic terror, Fulani herdsman, and political corruption so increase the nation's volatility that eruption after eruption buries this formerly proud African nation like Pompeii under the ash heap of history? ✝

Rohingya Christians: The Oppressed of the Oppressed

By Mark S.

The Rohingya are among the world's most oppressed groups. But within the Rohingya there is a subgroup who are the oppressed of the oppressed. They are the Rohingya Christians. The Burmese military violates them for being Rohingya, and then their fellow Rohingyas violate them for being Christian.

Following a series of military crackdowns that many consider a genocide, more than 1 million Rohingyas in Myanmar's Rakhine State have fled to neighboring Bangladesh, where most of them inhabit the Kutupalong refugee camp, which is the world's largest such camp.

A large factor in the ongoing persecution of Rohingyas is that there is no country with much incentive to defend them. The vast majority of Rohingyas have no citizenship anywhere. Technically speaking, everyone has a right to citizenship. But there remain millions of people across the world who are stateless.

The Burmese government refuses to even use the term "Rohingya," as it considers the people to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. During Myanmar's 2014 national census, the government was forcing Rohingyas to declare themselves as "Bengali."

In 2017, the situation became far more deadly for Myanmar's Rohingyas, the majority of whom had to flee the country and eke out a life in the Kutupalong refugee camp.

In such a venue, the present and future can seem quite bleak for anyone. But they are more precarious yet for the Rohingya Christians – who often face threats, beatings, and the vandalism and looting of their homes. Some attacks have seen as many as a dozen Rohingya Christians injured and hospitalized.

Recent Rohingya Christian converts might be kidnapped and brought to a mosque for forced reversion to Islam. Or a Rohingya Christian girl might be kidnapped and then forcibly married to one of her Muslim kidnappers. In one such case, the girl's father, a Christian pastor, was murdered.

Christians might also have to contend with false accusations, ranging all the way up to accusations of murder. Such circumstances mean that people who are already destitute might have to pay legal fees to defend themselves in court.

The main culprit behind these abuses is the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Rohingya rebel group that has carried out attacks against the Burmese military, as well as Rohingya Christians. Mohammad Sadeq, a Rohingya Christian, says that more than half of Rohingya Muslims is in favor of ARSA attacks against Rohingya Christians.

Peter Saiful, a pastor at the Bethel Church: Rohingya Christian Fellowship, estimates that about 70% of Rohingya Muslims support the anti-Christian attacks. He adds that this is "because of their Islamic scholars" who preach "hate speech against Christianity."

Saiful, who is also a resident of the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh, acknowledges that "there are a lot of good Muslims," but if they "raise their voice" then groups like ARSA "will kill them."

At this point, it is rare for a Rohingya Muslim to be friends with a Rohingya Christian. "If they are found to be friends with the Rohingya Christians, they would be expelled from their community or they would be beaten to death by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army," said Sadeq.

Most Rohingya Christians are people who converted to Christianity within the last 20 years. Sadeq says there are no Rohingya Catholics, and that any Rohingya Christians are either Fundamental Baptist or Evangelical.

Christians account for far less than one percent of the Rohingya population. Saiful knows of only 1,500 Christians among the one million Rohingyas living in Bangladesh.

Christian victims have scant options. "They can go to the authorities, but justice is not done," said Sadeq, who points out that – as the refugee camps are in the majority-Muslim nation of Bangladesh – the authorities are themselves Muslim. In some cases, Christian victims who complained had their ration cards confiscated.

On a less disheartening note, Saiful relates that survivors of the most serious anti-Christian attacks have been relocated to a transit center, which offers better protection.

Though the plight of the Rohingyas has garnered significant attention, there has not been much mainstream media reporting on the issue of Rohingyas Muslims attacking Rohingyas Christians. "They are not concerned about us," said Sadeq.

Saiful notes that when Christians were attacked in the refugee camp, authorities would prevent journalists from entering the area. "Bangladesh doesn't want the Rohingya Christian issue to be highlighted," he said, adding that, "ARSA sexually abused seven women

during the attacks, which was not reported by the media."

Sadeq would like to see the international community do more to provide proper shelter and safety for Rohingyas Christians, as well as obtaining justice for the severe attacks that have taken place against them.

Sadeq says that Rohingyas Christians "would be happy to make a new life" in a different country. This opportunity, however, can prove quite elusive.

"When a Muslim leader was killed by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, his family members and the relatives were resettled to Canada by the UNHCR [the UN Refugee Agency], as was another Muslim activist," said Sadeq. "But they are silent to the persecution often faced by the Rohingyas Christians."

He adds that, "One of the pastors was killed by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, and his family is still there in Bangladesh without safety."

Saiful said that Rohingyas Christians would prefer to return to their homeland of Rakhine State in Myanmar, but the 2021 military coup

has made returning unfeasible for the near future.

"Our plea to the international community is to come forward to push the government of Bangladesh to investigate the terrorist attacks towards the Christians in camp," said Saiful, adding that there needs to be "real freedom of religious practice" and "real protection" of Rohingyas Christians.



Has Persecution Intensified in Bangladesh?

By Matthew

It depends on whom you ask.

Some of the recent headlines look ominous. And as Bangladesh heads toward a national election in January 2024, there is concern among religious minorities that the country could take a step in favor of fundamentalist Islam.

Representatives from the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council recently went on hunger strike to express their fear and frustration over not having enough of a political voice to adequately address religious persecution.

According to the World Watch List, recent years have seen Bangladesh rise in severity. There are reports of land seizures of Christians becoming more prevalent, as well as politicians adopting a harsher tone toward religious minorities.

Over 90% of the 170 million people in Bangladesh are Muslim. The vast majority of the remainder is Hindu. Christianity has existed as a minority faith in Bangladesh for over half a millennium, dating back to the arrival of Portuguese explorers and Catholic missionaries in the early

1500s. The Protestant faith arrived in the mid-1700s due to the influence of British India.

Establishing numerous schools, hospitals and other social service venues, Christians have had an impact on Bangladesh that far exceeds their small part of the overall population.

Among current-day Bangladeshi Christians, about half are Catholic and half are Protestant, with Baptists comprising the most popular Protestant denomination.

Rev. Bishop Banarjee of B.L.C.M. says the Catholic Church faces persecution in Bangladesh but that Protestants tend to face more widespread persecution.

As to the percentage of Bangladeshis who are Christian, statistics range from as low as 0.3% to as much as 1 percent. Banarjee puts the number at 0.3%. He describes the situation of Christian converts as “ongoing,” taking place “not rapidly” but “slow and hidden.”

Rev. Samuel* (real name withheld to protect identity), a pastor in Dhaka, says

it’s difficult to estimate the number of Christian converts, explaining that converts to Christianity often choose to keep the Muslim or Hindu name appearing on their national ID card.

Though Islam is designated as the state religion, Bangladesh’s constitution stipulates “equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religions.” In practice, however, converting to Christianity in Bangladesh can beget significant difficulty, particularly if the convert comes from a Muslim background.

For decades, Bangladesh had been considered a moderate Muslim-majority country. But Banarjee says a change away from moderation began to take place about 20 to 25 years ago, when politicians started appealing to more strong line segments of the Muslim population.

Banarjee says that although some anti-Christian incidents are perpetrated by Hindus, the vast majority are perpetrated by Muslims.

“If a Muslim converts to Christianity and declares their allegiance to Jesus publicly, they face immediate threats and violence. These new Christian believers stand to lose their families, communities, and very lives,” says Banarjee.

“It’s very difficult to say what percent of Bangladeshi Muslims support acts of persecution against Christians,” says Banarjee. But whatever the precise number, he contends that such trouble has become more widespread in the last decade, and at this point “large numbers of Muslim people like to persecute Christians.”

Banarjee adds that, in the last ten years, many church buildings have been destroyed and many Christians have lost their property or their lives.

In June 2023, Patrick D’Rozario, the former archbishop of the Catholic archdiocese of Dhaka, made national headlines when he denied that there is significant persecution against Christians in Bangladesh.

Banarjee described the former archbishop’s denial as “a political statement.”

Samuel, though, seems to agree with the former archbishop. “Compared to Pakistan, Christians enjoy freedom in Bangladesh,” he says.

However, just because a country has less persecution than Pakistan doesn’t necessarily mean it’s safe.

Finding Christians to share about conditions in Bangladesh can prove somewhat challenging. Some seem scared for their safety. Others seem to feel that current conditions aren’t so bad but could get

worse quickly if they draw too much attention to the issue of persecution.

“The government will counsel us to not make any clash with majority people,” says Samuel. He feels the government is also concerned about violence from Islamic fundamentalists inside the country.

Aside from fundamentalist violence, persecution can surface in Bangladesh through land grabs. Land can be scarce in Bangladesh, which is among the world’s most densely populated countries. And of the world’s ten most densely populated nations, Bangladesh has by far the most people.

Banarjee says Bangladeshi Christians are easy targets for land grabs because the people grabbing the land figure that the authorities won’t care about Christians getting victimized, even if the unlawful evictions turn lethal.

Aside from land grabs, Banarjee says, “Very often churches are destroyed.” He also reports having received religiously motivated death threats on two occasions and suffering an attack while riding his motorcycle.

“Day by day, the persecution against Christians is increasing,” says Banarjee. “And in the next ten years, there will be more.”

However, Samuel feels that persecution has become less severe over the last 15 years. And that there are now fewer incidents of arson against churches and fewer physical attacks on Christians.

Samuel believes that, overall, most Muslims in Bangladesh do not support per-

secuting Christians. He adds that many of the Bangladeshi Muslims are decent people, but there is an uneducated portion of the population who can become “brainwashed by the hatred” vented by radical imams, whether they encounter these imams in person or online.

Samuel says that anti-Christian persecution is not often a part of life in urban areas. But in remote areas, where people are generally not as educated, such persecution is more likely to surface.

He relates that last year, while baptizing Muslim converts to Christianity in a village, there were Muslim villagers standing outside the home. That night, when Samuel had returned to Dhaka, these Muslim villagers began accusing the new Christian converts of having burned the Quran. The converts ultimately had to flee their home and village and shelter in the city.

Samuel explains that the Bangladeshi government is not in favor of such harassment, but that villages are, to a large extent, outside their protection. He adds that authorities will tell Christians to refrain from making any legal complaint, adding that if they do so, life will be more dangerous.

As Bangladesh approaches its national election in early 2024, religious minorities will be watching with apprehension. Even Christians like Samuel, who feel that their government makes a reasonable effort at maintaining religious pluralism, acknowledge that ultimately the “politicians are elected by vote, and they must focus on the majority groups.”





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