

Hearing on Religious Freedom
Fjellhaug Skoler, Oslo
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Opening statement
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Thank you very much for inviting me to give the opening statement at this public hearing on religious freedom. It's a great pleasure for me to be here. Let me first of all commend "Forum 18" for your work on this issue and for calling this public hearing.

Religious freedom – one of the basic human rights

Religious freedom and belief is one of the fundamental human rights. Actually, it's more than that. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the pillars of our democratic civilisation, and a necessary basis for the entire history of human rights. Without freedom to worship, there can be no real political freedom – nor freedom of thought and freedom of conscience. These are interrelated.

Religious freedom is one of the basic human rights because religion and thought constitute a part of the core of human identity. Religious freedom is thus in the same category as other basic rights relating to the protection of the integrity of the human being. In this connection I think of the right not to be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment, the prohibition of slavery and the right to life.

Thus, restrictions on religious freedom is an offence against core values of human life and dignity, even if it is not as "visible" as some other violations of human rights.

Article 18

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The right to religious freedom was clearly stated in article 18, which reads like this:

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

A new report two aspects of religious freedom

Norwegian authorities, research institutions and non-governmental organisations have generally become increasingly engaged in the work for human rights, but the focus on religious freedom has not always been on the forefront. Today, we may take some steps to sharpen that focus.

We all look forward to the presentation of the report on religious freedom that will be presented right after my statement. I've had a chance to look quickly through the report. Tom Arne Hellerslia and the steering committee of Forum 18 have prepared an interesting document with a special emphasis on the right to choose religion and registration systems. As I will indicate later in my opening remarks, I think these two aspects are important and should be given increased attention in our efforts to promote religious freedom throughout the world.

I will, however, not disclose the highlights and conclusions of the new report. That's a privilege of the next speaker. Instead I share with you some general reflections on human rights as a background for the closer focus on religious freedom - which will be the topic of the day.

Human dignity and human rights

Protecting human dignity and promoting human rights does in my view constitute basic tasks of our commitment as citizens – and as politicians. Accordingly, human rights has been a devotion of mine throughout my entire career as a politician. Indeed, it was the first cause that made me organise a

demonstration in the front of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It happened as far back as in 1968, in connection with the so-called Biafra war in Nigeria.

During the years, I have had positions that have given me a chance to meet many of the leading political personalities of the world. But, one thing is for sure: - Those who have made the strongest impression on me, all have names connected with the fight for human rights. Some of them got the Nobel Peace Prize for their historic efforts to defend and promote human rights.

That goes for President Nelson Mandela and bishop Tutu, who have both meant so much for the abolition of the apartheid system and the establishment of a new, democratic South Africa where all people have the same fundamental rights - whatever colour their skin may have.

That also is the case with Aung San Suu Kyi - the tender, but resolute woman - that has devoted her life to the fight for human rights and democracy in Burma, Myanmar.

And that goes for the latest Nobel Peace Prize laureate, President Kim Dae Jung, who was awarded the prize for his work for democracy and human rights in South Korea and in East Asia in general, and for peace and reconciliation with North Korea in particular. Kim suffered hardships for decades, was sentenced to death twice and was almost killed because of his persistent fight for human rights in his home country, South Korea. But at last he prevailed, and is now striving to bring his country into the family of nations who praise democracy and human rights - not only in words, but in deeds.

Progress and setbacks in the fight for human rights

Some of these Nobel Peace Prize winners have obtained great political victories, that have improved the human rights' situation in their home countries. Some are still fighting under harsh conditions - like Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar. A world report on human rights certainly will include positive as well as negative chapters.

Looking back on the development during the five decades since the United Nations launched the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I will first of all emphasise that great progress is achieved in many parts of the world. For many years, the notion of universal human rights was rejected by many politicians as some kind of Western idea, not really relevant for their culture, political system or historical stage. During the latest five decades, the commitment to these basic human rights has been taken on by more and more countries and individuals as a universal obligation.

The collapse of the totalitarian Communist system in Eastern Europe was crucial in this positive development. It didn't only give Eastern Europe a new chance, it released many countries in the third world from the geopolitical rivalry between Soviet communism and Western democracy. Now, they choose, in increasing numbers, to go for real democracy and respect for human rights.

This development creates restrictions to legitimate use of state power. The state has to respect the individual's inherent rights. Human rights' appeals from abroad cannot any longer be that easily dismissed as illegitimate interference into internal matters of sovereign states. Human rights are universal, and all governments can be held responsible for violations of human rights. For the global family of nations - for mankind - that's great progress.

Religious freedom throughout the world

Let me then turn to the one human right that is the main topic of this hearing.

The opportunity to freely practise one's own religion or belief has been challenged frequently throughout history, and is still denied the citizens of many countries. In some countries there are restrictions in the right to practise any religion, in other countries there is a lack of tolerance for more than one religion.

Before I comment on specific problems and countries of specific concern, I will underline the fact that all countries in their historical record have dark chapters when it comes to religious freedom. That goes for my own country, too.

Norway did not include religious freedom in its original constitution from 1814. A reference to religious freedom for members of all Christian denominations should have been included, but was - as far as I have found out - deleted because of an editorial mistake.

There still are aspects of religious freedom that are subject to political discussion in Norway today – for example in connection with the educational system and the state church system - but I will not comment on them here. My opening remarks will be concentrated on some global trends with respect to grave violations on the right to religious freedom on the international arena.

As for human rights in general, I see some positive developments for the right to religious freedom in particular. Great progress has been achieved in some parts of the world, where totalitarian or authoritarian political systems based on atheism have lost ground.

On the other hand, there are more than enough trouble-spots left. During the last few years, there may even be indications of a setback in the conditions for religious freedom. The situation certainly should cause concern.

My comments are not exhaustive, but short notes on four types of violations of the right to religious freedom. The four categories are:

- Authoritarian attempts to control religion
- State hostility toward minority or non-approved religions
- State neglect of discrimination
- Discriminatory legislation

I: Authoritarian attempts to control religion

We still observe totalitarian or authoritarian attempts to control religious belief or practise.

During the last days, news from Afghanistan have reminded us of that fact. Afghanistan lacks a recognised government, but is under substantial control of the Taliban movement, which has engaged in persecution and killings of Afghan Shi'as in significant part because of their religious beliefs. Now, the Taliban does not only want to shoot down people of wrong belief and religion. They even want to shoot down a unique part of the country's historical heritage – that includes some giant Buddha statues in the mountains – religious statues that are up to 1 400 years old.

In Burma, Buddhist monks who promote human rights are arrested and coercive measures are used to induce Christians to convert into Buddhism.

In China, government intolerance of unregistered religious activity has led in some areas to persecution of people, harassment and prolonged detention as well as police closure of places of worship. Among the victims of such persecution are Tibetan Buddhists and Protestants and Catholics who do not belong to the "official" churches. China is one of a number of countries that have set up "registration systems" that in practise functions as a severe restriction on religious freedom. There are certainly good reasons for making this one of the two main focuses in the new report from "Forum 18".

The government of Iran has implemented policies designed to eradicate the Baha'i faith, and other religious minorities suffer various degrees of discrimination.

In Iraq, the government of Saddam Hussein has organised arrests and murders of leaders' of the Shi'a muslim population.

These are only examples from a list that could be made much longer.

II: State hostility toward minority or non-approved religions

State hostility toward minority or non-approved religions can be found in many countries throughout the world.

Pakistan is one of several countries where discriminatory legislation has encouraged an atmosphere of religious intolerance, which has led extremists to attack members of religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus and Ahmadis.

In the former Yugoslavia we have seen a lot of such atrocities. In Sudan, an ongoing civil war has provided the contexts for many abuses against religious minorities by the regime. More examples could be mentioned.

III: State neglect of discrimination

In other countries we observe state neglect of discrimination against, or persecution of, minority religions and non-approved religions. Egypt, India and Indonesia provide examples of this kind of violations of the principle of religious freedom.

I visited Egypt when I was prime minister of Norway, and used the opportunity to discuss the subject with the authorities as well as with representatives of the Coptic church. Although religious minorities are expressing their concern in a very careful manner - you may even have problems to have representatives coming here to witness at this hearing - there clearly are reasons for serious concern. (The authorities do try to control extremist groups, and it's no easy task. However, they could do more.)

IV: Discriminatory legislation

In some countries we can see discriminatory legislation or policies discouraging certain religions. Let me only mention one example. In the wake of the collapse of Communism Russia first got a law that encouraged religious freedom in 1990. Then, in 1997, it was replaced by a restrictive law. Western influence has to some degree blunted the worst consequences of the new law.

As a special problem that may have increased during later years is the use of sharia law in some muslim countries. I had the chance to discuss this problem with President Obasanjo when I visited Nigeria a year ago. He is himself a Christian believer, and it's certainly a difficult challenge for him to find the best strategies to counteract the problems that may result from Sharia law practices in the Nigerian states that are dominated by Muslims.

Norwegian action to promote religious freedom

During the two and a half years when I was Prime Minister of Norway, human rights were a priority concern for the government. One of the ministers, Hilde Frafjord Johnson, was given the co-ordinating responsibility for human rights.

We presented an action plan containing some three hundred concrete measures to improve the work for human rights at home and abroad. Central human rights conventions were incorporated into Norwegian law. The human rights awareness of Norwegian industries was strengthened through the advisory body called KOMpact. To mention a few of many initiatives that were taken during these years.

In close co-operation with the minister for human rights and development, Hilde Frafjord Johnson, and the foreign minister, Knut Vollebæk, I also tried to give new impetus to the work for religious freedom. Let me mention one example of that effort – that's the way we used the year of Norwegian chairmanship in OSCE, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

What were the concrete initiatives we took?

First, the Norwegian chairmanship reactivated the OSCE expert panel on religious freedom, led by Rudiger Knoll. This panel was given funding to make a list of priorities and to initiate some projects.

The chairmanship further arranged a special conference on religious freedom in Vienna in March 1999. This conference gathered more than 150 experts from all member states as well as the major NGOs in the field, and led to a set of recommendations and conclusions about further work in the field.

Later in the year the chairman arranged a high-level conference, at political level, in Oslo on religious freedom and how to use religion in conflict resolution. Here representatives of the major conflicting parties in Kosovo also came, along with other representatives.

During the chairmanship we also decided that all missions should, as a routine task, consult religious leaders in their host countries on how they could contribute to peace building, partly by strengthening religious freedom.

Conclusion

What we did during one year of OSCE chairmanship is only an illustration of the vast possibilities that lie ahead of us, if we have the imagination and the political will that's necessary to seize the opportunities.

I see similar opportunities for improved efforts to promote religious freedom in other organisations and institutions.

I challenge the non-governmental organisations to discuss among themselves whether they could give greater attention to this important part of the human rights agenda.

I challenge those who are working with research and those who are allocating money for research and documentation to discuss what they can do.

I challenge people from the mass media to look into their possibilities of giving higher priority to coverage of conditions for religious freedom.

And finally, I challenge politicians – among them myself – to pay higher attention to what can be done to promote religious freedom, not only as a measure to improve the rights of the individual, but also as an instrument to promote peaceful solutions to conflicts where tensions between different religious groups have added to the problems.

Religious discrimination and lack of religious freedom have appeared among the causes of conflicts throughout the world. Let's now turn it the other way around, and make realisation of religious freedom for all a part of the solution.

That should be the challenge in the years ahead of us!
Thank you for your attention!