



# IPPFoRB

International Panel of Parliamentarians  
for Freedom of Religion or Belief

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## **An Embattled Right: Protecting and Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief**

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### **Advocacy Letters**

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Thank you for agreeing to attend the symposium *An Embattled Right: Protecting and Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief* and the subsequent high level political event on religious freedom at the German Bundestag, in Berlin, 12-14 September 2016.

This document sets out for your careful attention and consideration 4 advocacy letters addressing specific religious freedom concerns in Eritrea, Pakistan, Sudan, and Vietnam. A further advocacy letter on the situation in Myanmar will be tabled at the symposium following an IPPFoRB fact-finding and solidarity visit to Myanmar in August 2016.

Parliamentarians will have an opportunity, if they so choose, to support one or more of these advocacy initiatives by signing the letters in Berlin. Signed letters will then be forwarded to the relevant embassies in Berlin.

Please note that these are voluntary sign-on letters that provide an opportunity for interested parliamentarians to work together to support freedom of religion or belief in particular countries of concern. Parliamentarians should feel under no compulsion to sign these letters.

Unfortunately, due to the pressures on the program there will be no formal discussion of these advocacy letters at the symposium. If you would like to discuss these advocacy initiative letters ahead of the symposium then please email the IPPFoRB Secretariat at [contact@ippforb.com](mailto:contact@ippforb.com)

We look forward to welcoming you to Berlin.



# IPPFoRB

International Panel of Parliamentarians  
for Freedom of Religion or Belief

14 September 2016

His Excellency Isaias Afwerki  
President  
Republic of Eritrea  
Asmara, Eritrea

Dear President Afwerki:

We write as a global network of parliamentarians from diverse political, religious, and geographical backgrounds, committed to the promotion and protection of the freedom of religion and belief for all to respectfully express our concern about the status of freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea. We urge your government to initiate reforms to allow Eritreans to freely practice the religion of their choice, and we would welcome an opportunity to speak with you further about these reforms.

We commend the peaceful relations between religious communities in Eritrea, especially given the instability in the region. However, we are gravely troubled by the Eritrean government's detention and reported torture of religious prisoners and the restrictive legal structure that prohibits Eritrean citizens from exercising their full religious freedom rights.

It is unacceptable that hundreds of Eritreans are detained in extremely harsh conditions solely for practicing their religion. We are particularly concerned by the 20-plus year detention of Paulos Eyassu, Issac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam, the 12 year detention of Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel and Reverend Haile Naizge, and the 10-year house arrest of Patriarch Antonios. We urge your government to immediately and unconditionally release these and all other prisoners of conscience.

We also are troubled by the lack of legal protections for freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea. The government's failure to implement the 1997 constitution, which specifically protects this right, or to register religious communities who have applied under the 2002 registration law denies these populations a legal basis on which to practice their faith, including holding services or other religious ceremonies, and leave them vulnerable to arrest and detention. And the 1994 decree revoking Jehovah's Witnesses' citizenship rights completely denies them their basic human rights. We urge the government of Eritrea to bring national laws and regulations, including registration requirements for religious communities,

into compliance with international human rights standards; end persecution of unregistered communities and register such groups; grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses; and provide for conscientious objection by law. Further, we understand your government is drafting a new constitution: we urge that it include strong protections for freedom of religion or belief in line with international human rights standards.

Thank you for taking into consideration our concerns and recommendations. We look forward to fruitful future discussions on improving freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea.

Sincerely,

CC: Presidential Advisor Yemane Ghebream



# IPPFoRB

International Panel of Parliamentarians  
for Freedom of Religion or Belief

14 September 2016

His Excellency Shehbaz Sharif  
Chief Minister  
Province of Punjab  
Islamic Republic of Pakistan  
Lahore, Pakistan

Dear Chief Minister Sharif:

We write as a global network of parliamentarians from diverse political, religious, and geographical backgrounds, committed to the promotion and protection of the freedom of religion and belief for all to respectfully raise concerns about human rights abuses occurring in your province through the use of the blasphemy law and discrimination against Ahmadi Muslims.

Many of us welcomed steps your government took to review cases of alleged blasphemy to ensure innocent individuals were not jailed. However, cases continue to arise with numerous new charges being brought, and longtime concerns remain about imprisoned individuals, such as Aasia Bibi. Based on NGO reports, the blasphemy law is wrongly applied against Muslims more than any other faith community, but it has a disproportionate impact on the much smaller minority communities. While the blasphemy law inherently conflicts with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we recognize Pakistan's blasphemy law is found in the national criminal code and reform is beyond the cognizance of your jurisdiction. At the same time, we ask that you take steps at the provincial level to ensure the law is not abused to settle disputes or to victimize minorities. Such actions would include you speaking out publicly against the misuse of this law; initiating a wider provincial government review of all blasphemy charges and pending cases for evidence of fraud or abuse; ensuring allegations of blasphemy are reviewed at the highest possible level before police file a First Information Report, so as to ensure the law is not abused; and taking legal action against individuals making false allegations to discourage exploitation of the law's vague provisions.

The other issue we wish to raise concerns the actions of authorities in your province against Ahmadi Muslims. It has come to our attention that many of the foundational books of the Ahmadi faith have been banned by Punjab provincial officials. In addition, 80 year old

Ahmadi bookseller Abul Shukoor was arrested, tried and sentenced to eight years for selling allegedly extremist and blasphemous literature – which were these books. In addition, his Muslim employee Mazhar Ahmad was also sentenced in a similar way. Ahmadis in Pakistan face many challenges through discriminatory treatment in the constitution, disenfranchisement of their vote, and reoccurring violence. In addition to dealing with these longstanding concerns, we ask that you lift the ban on the Ahmadi books and see that the bookseller and his associate are released.

Mr. Chief Minister, your country has suffered much at the hands of terrorists and extremists. As you know, Pakistan was founded out of a concern for religious minorities in British India and the white bar on Pakistan's flag represents a commitment to minority rights in your country. We want to partner with you and other Pakistanis in helping your country fully realize this ambitious dream.

Sincerely,



# IPPFoRB

International Panel of Parliamentarians  
for Freedom of Religion or Belief

14 September 2016

His Excellency Ibrahim Ghandour  
Minister of Foreign Affairs  
Government of Sudan  
Khartoum, Sudan

Dear Minister Ghandour:

We write as a global network of parliamentarians from diverse political, religious, and geographical backgrounds, committed to the promotion and protection of the freedom of religion and belief for all, to respectfully express our concern about the government of Sudan's continued imprisonment and persecution of religious leaders, confiscation of church buildings and harassment of the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church and its members. We request that all charges against religious leaders are immediately dropped and we further request an end to the confiscation of church buildings, harassment of the pastors, their congregation, and the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church.

We welcome the release of Talahon Nigoski Kassa Ratta of the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church on May 10th. However, of particular concern is the continued detention of Rev. Hassan Abduraheem and the re-arrest of Rev. Kuwa Shamal, both of the Sudan Church of Christ, who are currently on trial on spurious national security-related charges. We also urge the Sudanese government to immediately release Revs. Abduraheem and Shamal, and to ensure all charges against them and their co-defendants are dropped.

We are also concerned by the government's attempt to seize church buildings belonging to the Sudan Church of Christ and the Baptist Church in Khartoum Bahri. The confiscation and demolition of the buildings and the government's policy not to issue new church licenses, would leave these communities without a meeting place and violate their right to worship.

We have written to you before about the harassment of the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church and we are disappointed that such actions continue. Along with the trial of Revs Abduraheem and Shamal, and attempts to seize church buildings in Khartoum Bahri the government's seizure of the church's training school, and the subsequent arrest and fining of church members and leaders who protested this action are only the latest examples of the ongoing denial of religious freedom for this religious community. We call on the government

of Sudan to abide by its constitutional and international commitments to freedom of religion or belief.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



# IPPPFORB

International Panel of Parliamentarians  
for Freedom of Religion or Belief

14 September 2016

His Excellency Nguyễn Xuân Phúc  
Prime Minister  
Socialist Republic of Vietnam  
Hanoi, Vietnam

Dear Prime Minister Phúc:

We write as a global network of parliamentarians from diverse political, religious, and geographical backgrounds, committed to the promotion and protection of the freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief for all people. In September 2015, we wrote to your predecessor about limitations on religious freedom and discrimination against religious minorities in your country. We respectfully appeal to you again with the same message.

Vietnam has made laudable progress to improve human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. Today, many individuals and religious communities are able to practice their faith freely, openly, and without fear. Unfortunately, however, many others still cannot do so, because they are either restricted in the practice of their faith or subjected to harassment, detention, or physical violence. We continue to receive reports that local authorities in some areas single out religious organizations that do not have government recognition. We also hear that some local government officials threaten religious followers with eviction from or demolition of their places of worship and other religious buildings. Lastly, we are concerned about the individuals detained, arrested, or imprisoned due to their religious beliefs or religious freedom advocacy, often on unrelated charges (such as through Article 258 of the Criminal Code).

The religion law your government is drafting is an opportunity to address these concerns. Mandatory, onerous registration requirements disadvantage many religious organizations, particularly those largely comprised of ethnic minorities and those who prefer to remain independent from the government. Importantly, these measures contravene Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international standards.



International legal experts believe the draft would be improved if provisions: 1) move away from an approval-based system and towards a notification-based system, in which religious groups would be required only to provide notification of an activity (religious meetings, ceremonies, etc.) to government officials; 2) confirm that failure by the government to respond to applications for registration or activities by the deadline constitutes approval; 3) allow unregistered religious organizations to worship in private; 4) clarify that any facility, public or private, to which individuals have legal access, can be considered a legal location to practice religion; and 5) offer legal personality to religious groups so desiring.

Prime Minister Phúc, under your leadership Vietnam has the opportunity to demonstrate the seriousness of its commitment to the inherent right to freedom of religion or belief. Doing so would send a clear signal around the world about your country's respect for genuine human rights. We respectfully and strongly encourage you to end the harassment of unregistered and independent religious groups, remove notices of eviction or demolition on religious buildings, release unconditionally religious detainees and prisoners, and ensure the religion law conforms with international standards and Vietnam's constitution.

Sincerely,