

# Does Election Outcome Ring Death Knell for Religious Freedom?

Not much is changing on Capitol Hill in the wake of the **2012 elections**. There will be some new names and faces in the 113th Congress that convenes in January, but Republicans kept control of the House, and Democrats stayed in charge of the Senate and the Oval Office.

That's bad news for those who hoped change would come in time to rescue a **religious freedom** bill languishing in the Senate. According to Open Doors USA Advocacy Coordinator Lindsay Vessey, "With the current makeup, particularly in the Senate where this bill is stuck, I don't see that there is going to be a lot of additional motivation, just based off the election results for the current group of senators to move this bill."

Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) introduced H.R. 440, a bill that would create a special envoy to promote religious freedom specifically in the Middle East and South-Central Asia. Vessey explains, "It had overwhelming bi-partisan support. It was just amazing to see that kind of support for this type of religious freedom bill." It was co-sponsored by 80 lawmakers from both parties and passed in the House in July 2011 by a 420-20 vote.

Then came the Senate companion bill, S 1245. "Currently, there's a hold on it. We've been told that that's by Senator Jim Webb (D-Va.)." Wolf is expressing his frustration over the lack of traction. He also says Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman John Kerry (D-Mass.) has disregarded his requests for a hearing on the matter.

The clock is ticking on the bill, explains Vessey. "If that bill is not brought to a vote in the Senate before the end of

the year, then this session of Congress ends, the bill dies, and if we want to pass this bill again, we have to re-introduce it in both the House and the Senate in the next session of Congress.”

That’s valuable time lost, and it’s affecting lives around the world. “Looking at the situation, what’s happening in Iraq with the mass exodus, looking at the situation for Christians in Syria and in Egypt, and in so many of the countries that are in this region: We really are at a breaking point for some of these Christian populations.”

Since the bill focuses on the Middle East and South Central Asia, Vessey notes, a pattern emerges. “If you look at the list of those countries, a majority of them are on the Open Doors World Watch List of countries that persecute Christians the most. That’s, of course, Open Doors’ real interest in the bill.”

These are areas embroiled in the turmoil of the Arab Spring, civil war, and militia insurgencies. Some of the countries identified in the legislation include: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, plus the West Bank and Gaza, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

In many of these countries, Christians and other religious minorities have been marginalized, caught in the crossfire, targeted, and chased out of the country. That also creates refugee issues in places where the already marginalized have no recourse.

The legislation provides for the envoy—appointed by the president and reporting to the president and secretary of state—to work with foreign governments to address

discriminatory laws, and to recommend to the U.S. government appropriate responses to violations.

Vessey says there's very little time left to get things moving. With less than two months left in 2012, "To some degree, our hope is fading a little bit with this. What it really comes down to is enough people care and enough people are willing to put out the effort to get this bill moved."

Media, constituent, and public pressure could be enough to force Senator Webb to remove his hold, but it will take a concerted effort from everyone to do it, Vessey adds. However, "Certainly people can be praying for God to move in the heart of the Senator who has a hold on this bill. Also [pray that God will] move in the hearts of other Senators who have the ability to influence the situation, but maybe just haven't been willing to allocate their resources and their time to do that."