

Global Hostility Toward Religion Reaches 6-Year High

The share of countries with a high or very high level of social hostilities involving religion reached a six-year peak in 2012, according to a new study by the Pew Research Center.

A third (33 percent) of the 198 countries and territories included in the study had high religious hostilities in 2012, up from 29 percent in 2011 and 20 percent as of mid-2007. Religious hostilities increased in every major region of the world except the Americas.

The sharpest increase was in the Middle East and North Africa, which still is feeling the effects of the 2010-11 political uprisings known as the Arab Spring. There also was a significant increase in religious hostilities in the Asia-Pacific region, where China edged into the “high” category for the first time.

The new report—released two days ahead of Religious Freedom Day in the United States—is the fifth in a series of Pew Research reports based on two indexes (the Government Restrictions Index and the Social Hostilities Index) used to gauge the extent to which governments and societies around the world impinge on religious beliefs and practices.

The share of countries with a high or very high level of government restrictions on religion stayed roughly the same in the latest year studied. About three in 10 countries in the world (29 percent) had a high or very high level of government restrictions in 2012, compared with 28 percent in 2011 and 20 percent as of mid-2007. Europe had the biggest increase in the median level of government restrictions in 2012, followed closely by the Middle East-North Africa—the only other region

where the median level of government restrictions on religion rose.

Looking at the overall level of restrictions—whether resulting from government policies or from social hostilities—the study finds that restrictions on religion are high or very high in 43 percent of countries, also a six-year high. Because some of these countries (like China) are very populous, more than 5.3 billion people (76 percent of the world's population) live in countries with a high or very high level of restrictions on religion, up from 74 percent in 2011 and 68 percent as of mid-2007.

Among the world's 25 most populous countries, Egypt, Indonesia, Russia, Pakistan and Burma (Myanmar) had the most restrictions on religion in 2012, when both government restrictions and social hostilities are taken into account. As in the previous year, Pakistan had the highest level of social hostilities involving religion, and Egypt had the highest level of government restrictions on religion. Social hostilities related to religion in Burma (Myanmar) rose to the "very high" level for the first time in the study.

During the latest year studied, there also was an increase in the level of harassment or intimidation of particular religious groups. Indeed, two of the seven major religious groups monitored by the study—Muslims and Jews—experienced six-year highs in the number of countries in which they were harassed by national, provincial or local governments, or by individuals or groups in society. As in previous years, Christians and Muslims—who together make up more than half of the global population—were harassed in the largest number of countries (110 and 109, respectively).

The new study scores 198 countries and territories on the same 10-point indexes used in the previous Pew Research studies on religious restrictions around the globe:

- The Government Restrictions Index (GRI) measures government laws, policies and actions that restrict religious beliefs and practices. The GRI is comprised of 20 measures of restrictions, including efforts by governments to ban particular faiths, prohibit conversions, limit preaching or give preferential treatment to one or more religious groups.
- The Social Hostilities Index (SHI) measures acts of religious hostility by private individuals, organizations or groups in society. This includes religion-related armed conflict or terrorism, mob or sectarian violence, harassment over attire for religious reasons or other religion related intimidation or abuse. The SHI includes 13 measures of social hostilities.

The full report, "Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High," is available on the website of the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, as are the previous reports in the series.