

Why Christians and Muslims Are Terrified for Their Lives

Fifty religious leaders from the Christian and Muslim minorities in India met together last week to discuss the religious freedom challenges facing both groups under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

Christians are "facing physical, symbolic and structural violence" from Hindu extremists across the country, said Father Z. Devasagaya Raj at the conference in New Delhi on September 5-6.

This view is backed up by the recent report from the Evangelical Fellowship of India's Religious Liberty Commission, which recorded 134 attacks on Christians or their churches in the first half of 2016 – already almost as many as the annual totals for both 2014 and 2015.

Pointing out that the cases chronicled from January 1 to June 30 were just a "fraction of the violence on the ground" (only "carefully corroborated" incidents were included), the EFI report made several recommendations to Mr. Modi's government, including the repeal of the controversial "anti-conversion laws."

These laws – named "Freedom of Religion Acts" – are officially there to prevent religious conversions being made by "force," "fraud" or "allurement." But Christians and rights groups say that in reality the laws obstruct conversions generally, as Hindu nationalists invoke them to harass Christians with spurious arrests and incarcerations. Such laws are currently in force in five states – Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh – although they have been discussed in several others, such as in Maharashtra last year.

Nearly one-fifth of the reported incidents of anti-Christian

violence (25) occurred in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (India's most populous, with over 200 million people). The second and third highest frequency of attacks took place in states with anti-conversion laws: Madhya Pradesh (17 incidents) and Chhattisgarh (15).

Tamil Nadu was the other high scorer (14). In 2002, this state passed its own "Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Bill," but it was repealed in 2004 after the defeat of the BJP-led coalition. The BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, Prime Minister Modi's party) is known for espousing a Hindu nationalist agenda and currently rules several states in central and western India, as well as controlling the federal government. The EFI report notes that Tamil Nadu is now governed by a Modi "ally."

Last year, two BJP members – one in the Lower and one in the Upper House of the national Parliament – planned to introduce a Private Members' Bill, each in their respective House, to introduce a national law against conversion from Hinduism, which would then force a debate in the Parliament.

The MP in the Upper House, Tarun Vijay, said the recently released census had indicated that, "For the first time, the population of Hindus has been reported to be less than 80 percent. We have to take measures to arrest the decline. It is very important to keep the Hindus in majority in the country.

"My argument is that religion must remain a matter of personal choice. But in India, it has become a political tool in the hands of foreign powers, who are targeting Hindus to fragment our nation again on communal lines. This has to be resisted in national interest and in the interest of all minorities in India," he added.

The MP in the Lower House, Yogi Adityanath, a senior BJP legislator, Hindu head priest and founder of Hindu Yuva Vahini, a social, cultural and nationalist group of youths who

seek to provide a right-wing Hindu platform.

In June 2015, Adityanath declared that those opposing yoga and Surya Namaskar, a Hindu salutation to the sun god within yoga, “should leave India or drown themselves in the ocean.”

‘A Worrying Trend’

Christians account for around 5 percent of India’s population, according to the World Christian Database, though the official 2011 census figure was just 2.3 percent (with Muslims at 14.2 percent and Hindus 79.8 percent).

Last month, Tomson Thomas of Persecution Relief told World Watch Monitor attacks on Christians were at an “alarming level,” with more than 30 incidents a month being reported.

Meanwhile, the Mumbai-based Catholic Secular Forum said that in 2015 attacks on Christians had been reported on an almost daily basis.

Recent figures from Christian charity Open Doors, which works on such issues, suggest an even greater number of incidents (closer to 250) occurred in the first six months of this year. But whatever the precise figure, Rolf Zeegeers from Open Doors’ World Watch Research says “a worrying trend is emerging.”

“It is very alarming,” he said. “Violence against Christians in India seems to be increasing and becoming more frequent. And yet President Modi’s administration does nothing. Isn’t it about time that Western countries offer the Christian community help by using diplomatic channels to directly put pressure on the Indian government to stop these violent radicals?”

The furor surrounding Mother Theresa’s canonization on September 4 was another reminder of the difficulties faced by India’s Christian minority. A roadside crucifix in Mumbai was reportedly desecrated on the same day, while Hindu

nationalists continued to accuse the Catholic nun of having forcibly converted others. MP Yogi Adityanath said in June she had been on a mission to “Christianize India.” Meanwhile, an online petition was circulated in which she was labelled a “soul harvester” who proselytized the poor.

But perhaps there is a glimmer of hope in the conciliatory language used during the recent Supreme Court ruling, in which it was concluded that Christians had received “inadequate” compensation for the worst case of anti-Christian violence in India’s history—the 2008 Kandhamal rampage, during which around 100 Christians were killed, 300 churches and 6,000 Christian homes damaged and 56,000 people displaced after the killing of a Hindu leader.

The EFI report begins with a statement made by Chief Justice T.S. Thakur during that judgment: “The minorities are as much children of the soil as the majority and the approach has been to ensure that nothing should be done, as might deprive the minorities of a sense of belonging, of a feeling of security, of a consciousness of equality and of the awareness that the conservation of their religion, culture, language and script as also the protection of their educational institutions is a fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution...

“It can, indeed, be said to be an index of the level of civilization and catholicity of a nation as to how far their minorities feel secure and are not subject to any discrimination or suppression.”

Yet conciliation will mean little if what the report refers to as the “ominous and all-permeating impunity and occasional complicity of the administrative and police personnel” is not addressed.

The All India People’s Forum is quoted in the report as saying: “It is evident from the testimonies that the role of the police and administration is extremely lax. On some

occasions the police have openly sided with the Bajrang Dal [a militant Hindu group], refusing to protect the Christians.

“On one occasion the police and administration even failed to turn up, having convened a gathering of Hindus and Christians, and possibly informed the Bajrang Dal that they would not turn up, thus setting the scene for organized mob violence against the Christians. On the occasions where the district administration and police have intervened, it has not been to enforce the rule of law and uphold the Constitution and arrest the Bajrang Dal mischief-makers; rather the ineffectual mode of ‘dispute resolution’ has been adopted.” {eo}

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