

Why Is President Obama Silent on Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia?

President Obama did not publicly broach the subject of religious freedom during his visit Friday with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, despite a letter from 70 members of Congress urging him to do so on Thursday.

“Obama had not had time to raise concerns about the kingdom’s human rights record,” U.S. officials said, according to Reuters.

“This visit was an excellent opportunity for the president to speak up on an issue that affects millions of Saudi citizens and millions more foreign workers living in Saudi Arabia,” says Todd Daniels, Middle East regional manager for International Christian Concern (ICC). “Only last month, the president clearly stated that promoting **religious freedom** is a key objective of American foreign policy, and then reaffirmed that opinion in remarks following his meeting with Pope Francis on Thursday, according to the White House.”

“On top of this, 70 members of Congress specifically asked him to publicly address the issue, as well as other human rights concerns, with King Abdullah,” Daniels says. “How, despite all of this, the president could stay completely silent about religious freedom during his meeting is remarkable.”

Saudi Arabia is widely regarded as one of the most restrictive nations on earth in terms of religious freedom. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Not a single church or other non-Muslim house of worship exists in the country.”

Gatherings of religious groups that choose to meet in secret

risk being raided by the “Mutaween,” or Saudi religious police. In December 2011, 35 Ethiopian Christians were arrested and held for eight months after holding a worship service in a private home.

On Thursday, 70 members of Congress sent a letter to President Obama concerning his visit, saying, “In addition to public meetings, we urge you to address specific human rights reforms in your direct meetings with King Abdullah and other officials. Religious freedom is a major concern in the country. ... Saudi Arabia does not tolerate public worship by adherents of religions other than Islam, and the government also systematically discriminates against followers of minority Muslim faiths.”

According to some activists, Obama’s decision not to address **human rights** and religious freedom issues with King Abdullah also draws attention to two major vacancies in key human rights positions for the administration.

Currently, both the position of assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and the ambassador for international religious freedom remain empty, despite pressure from members of Congress and human rights organizations for the president to quickly fill the positions.

“The priority the Obama administration places on promoting human rights around the world should be judged not by what is said in speeches among friends and supporters but by the president’s words when standing face to face with leaders whose governments are oppressing millions,” says Isaac Six, ICC’s advocacy manager.

“It should also be judged by the political determination to staff key human rights positions here in the United States,” Six says. “The president’s silence yesterday in Saudi Arabia and the long-running vacancies at the State Department tell us more clearly than anything else that international human

rights issues and religious freedom are not at the top of this administration's agenda."

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