

September 24, 2003: Afghanistan Needs Freedom of Religion - Kansas City Star

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September 24, 2003 As President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan visits the United States this week, American officials should press for constitutionally protected religious freedom in his wounded nation. In his speech to the United Nations on Tuesday, President Bush called for other countries to stand with the people of Afghanistan and Iraq as they build free and stable countries. Such help is needed. Afghanistan is at an especially crucial point in its movement to implement democratic reform, so the United States must be clear that Afghanistan's new constitution should spell out the principle of protecting basic human rights. The Taliban, made up of religious fanatics, ran Afghanistan into the ground and allowed the al-Qaida terrorist network, more religious fanatics, to use the country as its training camp. The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were one of the results. So it's vital that the principle of religious freedom be included in the constitution Afghanistan is drafting. There is reason to worry, however. Some members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom just returned from Afghanistan, where they saw disturbing evidence that voices of religious reason are being shouted down by hardliners. The commission advises Congress and President Bush. The people who are in favor of constitutional provisions to protect religion are increasingly scared, and their voices are being muzzled, says commissioner Preeta Bansal, a constitutional lawyer who is a former solicitor general of New York. People who favor a hard-core Islamist view seem to be almost swaggering, as if they have the upper hand. Afghans should have considerable latitude in creating a constitution, a draft of which is expected by the end of the year. But the entire world has a stake in not allowing Afghanistan to deteriorate again into a radical religious state whose leaders oppress Afghan citizens and export violence. Bansal says the international community must commit itself to helping create a democratic Afghanistan that protects human rights. One reason to be especially concerned about whether Afghanistan adopts constitutional protections for religion is that Iraq is watching to see what the minimum standards are, says Bansal. We came away feeling very strongly that Afghanistan could end up being a nightmare, she says. Afghanistan's constitution should adhere to high standards of protecting all human rights, but religious rights are particularly important because of the country's history of abuse in that area. Karzai's visit gives American officials another opportunity to insist that Afghanistan protect religious freedom. If the United States supports an Afghan constitution that fails to do that, it may be complicit in turning Afghanistan back into a country in which terrorism can grow in an atmosphere of severe religious oppression. The world cannot afford that.