



**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**  
2021 Annual Report Virtual Launch Event

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

**Tony Perkins, USCIRF Vice Chair:**

Thank you, Chair Manchin.

In 2020, we were heartened to see improvement in religious freedom conditions in some countries. In fact, this year, as Chair Manchin noted, we removed three countries from our list of recommendations for the SWL: Bahrain, the Central African Republic, or CAR, and Sudan.

The change in status for Bahrain reflects ongoing improvements in the government's approach toward the country's marginalized Shi'a Muslim majority. In 2020, for example, Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain were able to observe the Ashura holiday with mostly reasonable COVID-19 social distancing precautions in effect. Additionally, Bahrain provides wide latitude for freedom of religion for the Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, and Christian communities.

CAR also continued to make progress in 2020. The government worked with international partners to implement key aspects of the 2019 peace agreement and hold violators accountable, while local organizations implemented successful programs to strengthen interfaith tolerance. As a result, there was a reduction in violence against individuals based on their religious identity.

In Sudan, the transitional government that took power in 2019 took substantial steps toward ending systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. It also continued to closely engage with USCIRF and other international stakeholders in doing so.

In February 2020, Vice Chair Bhargava and I were honored to lead a USCIRF delegation to Khartoum to assess religious freedom conditions and to engage again with the transitional leadership, including Prime Minister Hamdok and his cabinet. We were encouraged by the evident progress, as well as by further improvements as the year progressed. Most notably, in July, the transitional government adopted the Fundamental Rights and Freedoms Act, which repealed the apostasy law, ended flogging for blasphemy, banned female genital mutilation, permitted non-Muslims to drink alcohol, and abolished the guardianship law that required women to get a permit from a male guardian when traveling abroad with their children.

In addition to improvement in these three countries, we were encouraged to see the continued prioritization of religious freedom in U.S. policy in 2020. In June, then President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order on “Advancing International Religious Freedom,” which more explicitly integrated the issue into U.S. diplomacy and development efforts. February 2020 marked the official launch of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, a network of like-minded

countries committed to opposing religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion or belief for all.

Following two U.S.-hosted Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom in 2018 and 2019, Poland, a founding member of the Alliance, hosted the third ministerial on the issue this past November.

Unfortunately, religious freedom violations in China, and the extension of its influence far beyond its borders, represented the most troubling developments in 2020. The Chinese Communist Party's, or CCP's, increasing hostility toward Islam has resulted in campaigns to "sinicize" Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to rid the religions of alleged "foreign" influences.

In the Xinjiang region, the CCP's campaign has translated into mass atrocities against Turkic Muslim minorities, and in particular the Uyghur people. We were therefore in full support of the State Department's decision in January of this year to designate China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as genocide and crimes against humanity.

However, our report also found that China's growing overseas influence and activities also negatively affected religious freedom and other human rights far beyond its borders. The CCP government exercises its broad economic and geopolitical influence to pressure foreign countries near and far to accept its demands without concern for human rights. Tactics included harassment, intimidation, and detention of human rights activists, ethnic and religious minorities, and other critics and dissidents.

The Chinese government also exerted pressure on international companies, including American businesses, to disregard human rights abuses in, and international scrutiny over, their operations in China. It also expanded efforts to weaken and subvert the international human rights system and norms within the United Nations. Such efforts could have far-reaching implications around the world, particularly in countries and regions where authoritarian regimes suppress human rights and religious freedom. In fact, last month, after the United States sanctioned Chinese officials for egregious religious freedom abuses, China imposed retaliatory sanctions against Chair Manchin and me as well as other foreign government officials and previously against members of Congress.

I'll now turn the floor over to our other Vice Chair, Anurima Bhargava, to speak about several of the broader trends we identified as key threats to religious freedom globally in 2020, our recommendations related to non-state actors, USCIRF's Victims Database and Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, and some key recommendations for the Biden Administration.