



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Citizenship Laws and Religious Freedom**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

**Gayle Manchin, USCIRF Vice Chair**

Thank you very much, Chair Perkins.

Unfortunately, we too often witness governments engaging in this very behavior, stripping people of their citizenship simply because of the faith they practice in clear violation of international human rights standards. Today, we are focusing on how citizenship laws are a part of this process to target and disenfranchise minorities and the importance of understanding these laws through the framework of atrocity prevention.

In some countries, individuals are denied citizenship, or denied the benefits of citizenship, because of their religious identity. Some Christians in Vietnam, especially among the Hmong (Ha-mong) and Montagnard (Maan-ta-nyard), belong to unrecognized denominations and are denied key identity documentation due to their faith. This severely limits their access to employment, education, and other basic government services. Bahrain's government often revokes citizenship from dissidents on the grounds that they are complicit in terrorism, a tool that it uses disproportionately against Shi'a Muslims and with few legal safeguards to protect individual rights and freedoms. Several peaceful Bahraini opposition activists now live in exile as a result of citizenship revocations on this purported basis. In Kenya, the introduction of a new digital ID system threatens to disenfranchise many members of minority communities given their lack of documentation, especially for those who have been displaced by conflict.

Even more worrisome are government efforts to introduce new citizenship laws for the purpose of excluding certain groups or citizenship verification processes which leave many marginalized communities vulnerable to widespread exclusion. These processes often place the onus of

proving one's citizenship on the individual through the use of historical family documents that are often difficult to produce due to poverty, displacement by extreme weather or conflict, or simply the passage of time. Amidst such efforts, we have recently seen a dramatic uptick in hate speech and disinformation on social media, potentially exacerbating the impact on religious minority communities.

I will now turn to my colleague, Commissioner Anurima Bhargava.

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