



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

### Citizenship Laws and Religious Freedom

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

**Tony Perkins, USCIRF Chair:**

Good afternoon and thank you for attending today's hearing on *Citizenship Laws and Religious Freedom*. I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us to offer their expertise on this topic, and Senator Manchin and his office for providing this room for us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to Congress, the President, and the Secretary of State. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this hearing.

Today's topic has garnered much recent international attention. The use of restrictive citizenship laws is, however, a long-standing concern for protecting individuals' freedom of religion or belief. We have convened this hearing to explore how some governments leverage citizenship laws as a tool of oppression against religious minorities, and help us develop policy recommendations for the U.S. government in response.

The right to a nationality is a fundamental human right and serves as a bedrock for accompanying political and civil rights. It is the right to have rights. Denying individuals this fundamental recognition not only strips them of accompanying rights but also denies them the ability to participate in the political process and use legal pathways to seek redress for discrimination and persecution. These individuals are effectively rendered stateless. This makes

them vulnerable to exploitation, prolonged detention, and violence. In this way, the denial of citizenship can be a key predictor for mass atrocities. Too often, the denial of citizenship targets minority communities already vulnerable to persecution.

International legal standards have made it abundantly clear that governments have a responsibility to protect individuals' privileges as citizens of their home nation and not deny them this simply due to their faith.

Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to a nationality and no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his or her nationality. The United Nations Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness adds that an individual may not be deprived of nationality on racial, ethnic, religious, or political grounds or if this would render him or her stateless.

I will now turn the floor over to Vice Chair Gayle Manchin.

###