



ماعت للسلام والتنمية وحقوق الإنسان
Maat For Peace, Development, and Human Rights

UDHR ARTICLE 18

FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CONSCIENCE AND RELIGION BETWEEN REALITY & HOPES

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IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE (30 X 50) CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED
BY MAAT TO RAISE AWARENESS OF THE UDHR ARTICLES

Contents

Introduction:..... 2

Axis I: Definition of Article No. 18 of the UDHR 2

Axis II: Outstanding Global Examples of Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion 4

 1. Qatar4

 2. China.....6

 3. Iran8

Conclusion & Recommendations:..... 9

Introduction:

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is one of the Highest civil rights guaranteed by international human rights conventions. However, it was not until 1948 that this right was adopted and explicitly recognized as a basic human. Article 18 of the UDHR (UDHR) guaranteed the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion for all individuals; thus, it has represented an important turning point and an important landmark in the history of freedom of thought, religion and belief. In fact, the integration of Article 18 into the UDHR has been influenced by many factors, topped by religious persecution practiced by the Nazis against religious minorities in the aftermath of World War II, as the drafters of the Declaration wanted to avoid witnessing such a scenario in the future.

Although the UDHR and other international covenants have guaranteed the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for all individuals, including the right of the individual to adhere to his own ideologies, form his own beliefs, change his religion, manifest or outwardly display his religion or belief, either alone or as part of a community, through teaching, practice, worship and observance, millions of individuals worldwide still face grave human rights violations related to the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Many governments around the world still force millions of people to convert to a different religion, deny them their right to practice their religious rites and subject them to persecution because of their religious beliefs.

As part of the **(30 x 50) Campaign** launched by **Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights** to raise awareness of the articles of the UDHR, Maat presents this paper which focuses on Article No. 18 of the UDHR concerned with freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in two main axes; the first introduces Article No. 18 of the UDHR, while the second focuses on prominent global examples of violations of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which we will discuss in some detail as follows:

Axis I: Definition of Article No. 18 of the UDHR

Article 18 of the UDHR states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

In light of this, individuals have the right to choose their religion or belief, convert to a different religion, or abandon their religion altogether, and they also have the right to manifest their religion or religious beliefs in their own way, whether that is through worship or by practicing religious rituals, whether alone or within groups with others in public or private places. The main parts contained in Article 18 of the UDHR can be clarified and explained as follows:

1. **Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion:** This part of Article 18 affirms that everyone has the inherent right to hold on to his own ideas, form his own beliefs, and follow his own conscience without interference or coercion from others or the state. This means that people have the right to develop their own personal philosophies, moral systems, and religious beliefs.
2. **Freedom to change religion or belief:** This section recognizes the right of individuals to change their religion or belief at any time. It reinforces the idea that people's beliefs are a matter of personal choice and should not be forced upon them by outside forces.
3. **Freedom to manifest religion or belief:** This part of Article 18 highlights the right of an individual to express his religion or belief outwardly, and includes various forms of expression such as worship, rituals, practices, and education. These expressions can occur individually or collectively, in public or private settings.
 - **Worship:** Individuals have the right to worship according to their chosen religious or belief system. This can include prayer, meditation and other forms of religious practices.
 - **Performing rituals and rituals:** People are free to perform rituals within the framework of their religion or beliefs. These rituals can vary widely across different religions.
 - **Practice:** Refers to the necessity of observing religious or ideological practices in daily life, including actions, behaviors, and habits that are guided by the individual's belief or philosophical convictions.
 - **Education:** Individuals are allowed to share and teach their religious or philosophical beliefs to others. This includes conducting educational activities, discussions and imparting knowledge about one's faith.

- **Individually or collectively:** The freedom to manifest one's religion or belief may be exercised individually or collectively as part of a group or community.
- **In public or in private:** People have the right to express their religion or belief openly, as is the case in places of worship or in public gatherings, and they also have the right to practice their religion in seclusion or in their private space.

Axis II: Outstanding Global Examples of Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion

The UDHR, among other international instruments guaranteed individuals the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including one's right to adhere to his ideas , create or change religion or belief, manifest it outwardly in teaching, practice, worship and observance, both individually and collectively. However, millions of individuals face grave human rights violations related to the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Many governments force people to convert to a different religion, deny them their right to practice religion and persecute them for their religious beliefs. Outlined below are prominent global examples of violations of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion:

1. Qatar

In Qatar, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is subject to human rights violations. Individuals belonging to religious minority communities in Qatar, including Christians, Baha 'is, Hindus, and Buddhists, face severe restrictions on the free exercise of their religion or belief. According to international and local reports obtained by Maat in this context, Qatari authorities impose restrictions on the construction and opening of houses of worship and show religious symbols of the country's religious minorities, including Christians, Baha 'is, and Hindus. Qatari law requires the adoption of religious minorities to obtain a special permit from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to open and build all their religious buildings; however, obtaining such a permit is very complicated for non-Muslims. Religious minorities are forced to worship in private homes or certain authorized compounds and are not allowed to show their religious symbols in public places, including parks or public buildings. They are prohibited from wearing religious clothing, jewelry, or other symbols related to religion.

In 2022, for example, reports and statements from religious minority groups in Qatar indicated that Qatari authorities had not allowed the reopening of home churches that had closed down during the Coronavirus outbreak. However, Qatar's Christian minority was forced to hold prayers in private homes because the official churches in Qatar did not accommodate Christian worshippers. The same reports also indicated that the Qatari authorities had not allowed unregistered religious groups to obtain a place of worship. Although over the past years, the Qatari authorities had undertaken to consider applications from unregistered religious groups for a place of worship if they applied for registration, they failed to comply with those commitments. Unregistered religious groups couldn't establish and open their places of worship, including Baha 'is, Hindus, and Buddhists. Qatari authorities have also continued to prohibit official and registered church complexes in Qatar, including the Mesmer religious complex, from using Christian symbols such as crosses and statues or showing them on the exterior of church buildings.¹

Furthermore, houses of worship, cemeteries, and buildings belonging to Qatar's religious minority communities are subjected to repeated and systematic attacks on religious grounds. For many years, Qatar's Christian churches, buildings, and cemeteries have been looted, damaged, shelled, confiscated, destroyed, burned, and closed by Qatari authorities and some members of Qatari society alike for reasons of religion. Of the 5,110 attacks on churches, cemeteries, and other Christian buildings worldwide during 2021, more than 100 systematic attacks have occurred on places of worship, cemeteries, and Christian buildings in Qatar. Therefore, Qatar ranks fifth globally in the Christian Buildings and Churches Assault Index for 2022, according to the "Open Doors" ranking for 2022.²

Furthermore, individuals belonging to Qatar's religious minority communities, including Christians, Baha'is, Hindus, and Buddhists, are prohibited from participating and teaching their religious or philosophical beliefs in so-called religious proselytism. They are also prohibited from converting from the Islamic religion to any other religion. In this regard, proselytizing or attempting to convert Muslims to other religions is prohibited by law in Qatar. Qatari law criminalizes proselytism of any religion other than Islam in all its forms, whether in organized collective activities or individually. The Act

¹ Qatar: Full Country Dossier, Open Doors International: World Watch Research, January 2023, link: <https://bit.ly/41foEjN>

² Qatar: Full Country Dossier, Open Doors International: World Watch Research, January 2022, link: <https://bit.ly/43Wq6cy>

prescribes a penalty of up to 10 years for anyone's involvement in organized proselytizing activities and seven years for individual proselytizing. The law imposes a penalty of two years imprisonment and a fine of up to \$2,700 for possessing written, registered, or material that supports, promotes, or encourages missionary activity. The law also requires religious groups to obtain the authorities' permission to engage in religious activities. It provides for the deportation of members of religious groups engaged in unlawful or non-authorized worship activities.³ Between September 2021 and October 2022, for example, Qatari authorities forced at least two expatriate Christians to leave the country after allegedly engaging in religious proselytism.⁴

In addition, Qatar's law defines conversion from Islam to any other religion as apostasy from Islam, an illegal activity punishable by death by the law. Qatar's law also restricts public worship of religious minorities, allows non-Muslims to worship openly, and prohibits the provision of formal religious education to non-Muslims in public schools. The law prohibits religious minorities from publicly advertising religious services or displaying religious symbols, such as placing crosses outdoors where they are visible to the public. It provides for a penalty of \$820, three months imprisonment, or both for individuals, including those belonging to religious minorities, to eat or drink during daylight hours during Ramadan.

2. China

In China, the authorities violated freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The Chinese authorities have implemented a strictly national policy aimed at bringing all religious beliefs and practices into line with the CPC doctrine, eliminating different religious identities and integrating them into a single Chinese national identity, and Chinese character of religion by changing different religious beliefs and practices to bring them into line with the CPC's ideology of affirming loyalty to the state.

In this regard, Maat was informed of credible domestic and international reports that, over the past years, the Chinese authorities have worked to restrict freedom of religion and belief by targeting all members of religious minority communities with arrest, detention, and torture, imposing strict control over religious content and criminalizing the public manifestation of religious beliefs and symbols. According to

³ 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Qatar, Us department of state, JUNE 2, 2022, link: <https://bit.ly/3UPcCuP>

⁴ Qatar: Full Country Dossier, Previous reference

statistics obtained by Maat in this context, the number of people in prisons in China during 2022 because of their religious beliefs reaches more than 10,000. In addition, Chinese authorities banned all religious sites, particularly those promoting the Christian religion, strictly censored Christian religious content online, and removed articles published by Christian-related platforms. It instructed Internet service providers and individual users to remove accounts containing some words referring to Christianity, such as "gospel" or "Christ." The Chinese authorities also restricted the printing, distribution, and dissemination of religious materials, including the Bible of Christians, "The Gospel," the Quran, and other religious literature, and imposed prison sentences for the publication and copying of such materials. In October 2022, for example, the Sanmentia City Court in Henan Province upheld a five-and-a-half-year prison sentence for a Christian cleric for gospel printing for "illegal business operations" and for "printing and purchasing illegal publications."⁵

Furthermore, the Chinese authorities have been engaging in grave human rights violations against the Uighur and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang province since 2017, which have been classified internationally as crimes against humanity. In this context, since 2017, the Xinjiang government has been implementing anti-extremism regulations, according to which the Chinese authorities prohibit behaviors and practices that the government considers to be signs of extremism, such as beard growing, wearing a hijab in public places, stopping smoking and drinking alcohol, using some Islamic names when naming children, religious education of children, fasting in Ramadan, and possession of the Quran and prayer carpets.

In addition, the Chinese authorities have implemented some programs aimed at completely erasing the religious identity of Muslim minorities and integrating them into a single Chinese national identity, including the stay-at-home program of Chinese officials in Uighur homes to monitor families and force them to engage in certain practices and behaviors contrary to Islamic religious teachings such as eating pork and drinking alcohol. More than 1 million Uighur Muslim minority people were held in mass detention and training and rehabilitation centers that aimed to instill patriotism and erase their religious identities. According to reports obtained by Maat, law enforcement officers and officials working in detention camps and training centers subjected

⁵ 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Hong Kong, Macau, Tibet, and Xinjiang)), US Department of State, April 2023, link: <https://bit.ly/45cnao>

detainees to torture and ill-treatment, including electric shocks, baton beating, rape, sexual violence, forced sterilization, and solitary confinement, leading to hundreds of deaths.⁶

3. Iran

Iran is also one of the countries where the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is violated. These systematic violations by the Iranian authorities on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion prompted the United Nations General Assembly to adopt a resolution on 15 December 2022, expressing concern about the strict and unjustified restrictions on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in Iran. It was also concerned about attacks on places of worship and other human rights violations committed by the Iranian authorities against persons belonging to religious minority communities, including, for example, harassment, intimidation, persecution, arbitrary arrest and detention, and incitement to hatred.

In this context, Iran's freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is violated in law, governmental, and community practices. Iranian law prohibits all missionary activities involving conversion from Islam to any other religion, and conversion from Islam to any other religion is punishable by death. Iranian law also prohibits citizens who are not recognized as Christians, Zoroastrians, or Jews from expressing their religion ostensibly or engaging in public religious expression activities, including worship in churches or wearing religious symbols such as the cross, and Iranian law also imposes imprisonment on women who appear in public without the specific Islamic uniform. For example, in December 2022, Iran's judicial authorities sentenced Ms. Cipeda Rushno to five years imprisonment for not wearing a hijab. Mahsa Amini died in police custody in September 2022 after being assaulted by the Ethics Police following her arrest for not adhering to the Islamic dress code.⁷

In addition, Iranian authorities target persons belonging to religious minority communities because of their religious beliefs. In 2022, Iranian authorities arrested 140 people, sentenced 39, banned 51, called 102, and raided 94 people's homes because of their religious beliefs. More than 1,000 persons belonging to the Baha'i community were detained by the Iranian authorities in the criminal justice system by the end of 2022. The

⁶ 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: China (Includes Hong Kong, Macau, and Tibet), US Department of State, April 2023, link: <https://bit.ly/45cnarO>

⁷ 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Iran, US Department of State, link: <https://bit.ly/3Ccpqvw>

number of persons belonging to religious minority communities imprisoned in Iran by the end of 2022 due to religious practice is estimated to be 75.⁸

Conclusion & Recommendations:

UDHR and other international covenants guarantee that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. Nevertheless, millions of individuals around the world still face grave human rights violations related to the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as many governments, especially the Qatari, Chinese and Iranian governments, continue to deny millions of their citizens their right to practice their religious and intellectual rituals and beliefs. In light of the above, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights presents the following recommendations to the Chinese, Iranian and Qatari governments to enhance and improve the state of respect for religious, ideological and intellectual freedoms:

- Reviewing laws that restrict religious practices and freedoms and disproportionately target religious minorities, and those that restrict the expression of religious beliefs and intellectual freedom, and ensure that these laws are in line with international human rights standards;
- Promoting protection against discrimination based on religion or belief and ensure equal treatment for all citizens;
- Creating an environment that enables different religious and belief groups to coexist peacefully without fear of discrimination or persecution;
- Ending the persecution of religious minorities, and allowing them to practice their faith freely without fear of persecution or violence;
- Reviewing cases of individuals imprisoned for their religious beliefs and release detainees without proper legal justification;
- Ensuring the right of religious communities to own and manage their places of worship and religious property;
- Recognizing the rights of religious minorities, including their right to practice their religious rites in public and private places.

⁸ 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, US Department of State, link: <https://bit.ly/3oFhEOY>