

Obama signs bipartisan International Religious Freedom Act

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WASHINGTON—President Obama signed into law the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016—an action that drew praise from groups ranging from Baptist agencies to the American Humanist Association.

The bill enhances the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 by requiring the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom at the U.S. State Department to report directly to the secretary of state.

It also requires international religious freedom training for all foreign services officers, strengthens the role of the special adviser for religious freedom at the National Security Council and creates a list of religious prisoners of conscience.

In addition to the “countries of special concern”—a classification the State Department has used for two decades to identify nations that violate human rights and religious liberty—the bill adds the “entity of special concern” category for nongovernmental terrorist groups.

It also includes a “designated persons list” for individuals who commit egregious violations of religious liberty, and it authorizes the president to sanction them by executive action.

Honors contributions of veteran religious liberty champion

The bipartisan bill provides the U.S. State Department “new tools,

resources and training to help counter extremism and the growing persecution of religious minorities globally,” said Randel Everett, president of the [21st Century Wilberforce Initiative](#).

The legislation bears the name of the former Republican congressman from Virginia who was instrumental in passage of the 1998 version of the bill and who now holds the [Jerry and Susie Wilson Chair in Religious Freedom at Baylor University](#) and serves as senior fellow with the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative.

“No one has done more to advance the cause of international religious freedom than Frank Wolf during his 34 years serving in Congress and during these last two years with the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative,” said Everett, former executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

“Congressman Wolf has worked with both parties in Congress, human rights organizations and faith communities to call attention to the religious persecution and oppression that is happening among three-fourths of the world’s populations. His willingness to work with both parties and all faiths is reflected in the bipartisan support this bill has received from Congress and the quick support of the president.”

Bipartisan support lauded

Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s [Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission](#), called the bill “a vital step toward protecting conscience freedom for millions of the world’s most vulnerable, most oppressed people.”

“The bipartisan nature of this passage shows us that religious freedom does not have to be a partisan issue but is rooted in our deepest commitments as Americans, and I hope that persecuted religious minorities around the globe will see that they have not been forgotten,” Moore said.

Brent Walker, executive director of the [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#), echoed that sentiment.

“We are pleased that religious liberty still finds broad bipartisan support,” Walker said. “Strengthening the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, including by protecting nontheistic beliefs and requiring increased religious freedom training for our foreign service officers, emphasizes our shared value of religious liberty for all people across the globe.”

Expanded to include nontheistic belief systems

Representatives from the American Humanist Association likewise praised the bill for including protections for nontheistic religion, as well as the right not to practice religion.

The bill states “freedom of thought, conscience and religion is understood to protect theistic and nontheistic beliefs as well as the right not to profess or practice any religion.”

“Religious freedom for all people, theists and nontheists, is an American value we must protect,” said Matthew Bulger, legislative director of the American Humanist Association.

The organization’s executive director, Ray Speckhardt, praised lawmakers for “finally recognizing the human dignity of humanists and granting the nontheistic community the same protections and respect that have been given to religious communities.”

Leaders of International Christian Concern—a human rights organization focused on the persecution of Christians—said they were “elated” Congress passed what they called “the most important religious freedom legislation in more a decade.”

“It is the responsibility of the international community to defend the basic

human right of religious freedom, and this bill makes vital strides in ensuring that the United States continues to be at the forefront of protecting religious minorities around the world,” said Isaac Six, advocacy director for International Christian Concern.