

Government restrictions on religion increase globally

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WASHINGTON—A study by the Pew Research Center confirmed what the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and other human rights advocates already reported—increased government restrictions on religion around the world.

The [Pew study](#)—jointly funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation—examined 198 countries in 2016 and found increased levels in restrictions on religion.

The share of countries with “high” or “very high” levels of laws, policies or actions by government officials that restrict religious expression and practice rose from 25 percent in 2015 to 28 percent in 2016.

It marked the largest percentage of countries with “high” or “very high” level of government restrictions since 2013 and fell just short of the 10-year peak of 29 percent in 2012.

Social hostilities—acts of religious hostility by individuals, groups or organizations—remained stable at 27 percent.

Overall restrictions increased

Overall restrictions on religion—either by governments or private individuals or groups—increased in 2016, with 83 countries (42 percent) demonstrating “high” or “very high” restrictions. That’s compared to 80 countries (40 percent) in 2015.

In many countries, actions by government officials, social groups or

individuals espousing nationalist positions have caused restrictions on religion, Pew noted.



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One-third of European countries had nationalist parties that made political statements against religious minorities—an increase from 20 percent of countries in 2015, Pew reported. The number of countries where nongovernmental nationalist organizations targeted religious groups also increased in 2016.

Pew also noted 77 countries in 2016 where organized groups sought to dominate public life at the expense of certain religions, compared to 72 countries the year before. The number of countries where those groups also identified with nationalist movements or took positions against religious minorities and immigrants rose from 27 in 2015 to 32 in 2016.

‘Foundational freedom’

Elijah Brown, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, registered

concern about the impact of governmental restrictions on religion—both for Baptists in particular and for people of faith in general.

“The rise of nationalism and surges in violence continue to impact many Baptists and others of faith seeking to live out their convictions,” Brown said. “For example, in 2018 more than 1,000 deaths, over 90 percent of which have occurred in Christian communities, have been confirmed in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. More than 1 million Rohingya Muslims have been forced to displacement in Bangladesh.”

The most recent analysis by Pew Research showed within the parameters of “high” and “very high” restrictions only two countries in the world with a BWA member body showed marked improvement, and 17 countries “slid into the reality of ‘high’ and ‘very high’ religious restrictions and social hostilities,” Brown noted.

“The intersection between Baptist communities and violations of religious freedom remains deeply troubling,” he said. “The reality that in the last 12 months, 8 million more Baptists are now living in contexts of high to very high religious restrictions should be a clarion call for greater prayer and greater engagement.

“From the United Nations, to Washington D.C., to around the world, the BWA is actively working to address these situations. But the moment before us is so grave that sustained help to those who are suffering greatest and improvement in areas of greatest legal restrictions will require our entire Baptist community to pull together. The need remains as pressing today as ever for BWA Baptists to continue to emphasize our biblical conviction and historic legacy that religious freedom must extend to all people as a foundational freedom.”

‘Renewed defense of religious freedom for all’

Ferrell Foster, director of ethics and justice with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission voiced particular concern about the rising anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe and its impact on religious freedom.

“We Baptists desire religious freedom for all people, and so we should be greatly disturbed that much of the increase noted by Pew has been generated against Muslims moving into Europe,” he said. “There are restrictions and harassment targeting Christians, Jews, and others elsewhere in the world, but the increase is happening in places where religious freedom had been widely acknowledged. I hope this situation will push us toward a renewed defense of religious freedom for all people.

“Cultural and economic factors are at play here, and they are coming out in the form of nationalism. Jesus moved us to see all people as created in the image of God and worthy of respect. Nationalism sees people more as citizens than as God-created humans, and when nationalism grows religion can become part of what makes one accepted or rejected. Religious persecution can quickly follow.

“The situation in Europe is new, but there are parts of the world where religious persecution is not new and is often violent and deadly. We must not lose sight of the global atrocities committed against varied peoples of faith, including Christians.

“Many people in the world do not have the freedom to worship as their conscience dictates, and some put their lives in jeopardy to pursue their faith. This breaks my heart. Christians are still being martyred around the world, but I also want people of other faiths to have freedom to worship.”

‘Wake-up call to the church’

In April, the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom released its [annual report](#), saying “religious conditions deteriorated” in many countries in the period since the Pew study.

Frank Wolf, former U.S. congressman and now distinguished senior fellow with the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, noted the overall findings by Pew regarding global restrictions on religion were “the worst since Pew starting reporting on this in 2009.”

“I find this very discouraging. This should be a wake-up call to the church,” Wolf said.

He expressed appreciation to Sam Brownback, who was confirmed as U.S. [ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom](#) in January, and “an administration that is supportive and active in working with other countries to address this critical issue.” Brownback heads the U.S. State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom, which monitors religious freedom abuses globally.

“Whatever the news, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to defend and advocate globally for freedom of conscience and freedom to assemble,” Wolf said.