

Pakistan placed on ‘watch list’ for religious freedom violations

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WASHINGTON—The U.S. Department of State released its annual list of countries guilty of religious freedom violations, naming 10 nations as Countries of Particular Concern and placing Pakistan on a special watch list.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson re-designated Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as Countries of Particular Concern. The [State Department](#) applies the designation to nations that engage in or tolerate “systemic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.”

‘An important step’

Pakistan is the only country assigned to the special watch list, a category the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 created for nations that engage in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom but do not meet the criteria of Countries of Particular Concern.

Wolf, former U.S. Congressman from Virginia and now distinguished senior fellow at the [21st Century Wilberforce Initiative](#), praised the State Department for naming Pakistan to the special watch list, calling it “an important step.”

“Pakistan is a signatory of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, but they have treated the responsibilities associated with it casually and with no consequences,” Wolf said. “It is my hope that this will spur Pakistan to initiate long-needed reforms.”

In addition to the 10 nations the State Department listed as Countries of Particular Concern, the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) also gives that designation to Pakistan, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Russia, Syria and Vietnam.

‘A surprise and a disappointment’

The commission has named Pakistan to its own list of Countries of Particular Concern every year since 2002 and repeatedly has urged the State Department to do the same.

Daniel Mark, chair of the commission, expressed “surprise and ... disappointment” the State Department failed to list Pakistan among its Countries of Particular Concern, saying the department’s action “does not go far enough.”

“Pakistan continues to harass its religious minorities, has state-sanctioned discrimination against groups such as the Ahmadis and tolerates extrajudicial violence in the guise of opposing blasphemy,” Mark said. “Given the strong stance that President Trump has taken on Pakistan recently, the failure to designate Pakistan as a CPC this year comes as a surprise and a disappointment.”

Recently, the Trump Administration moved to freeze an estimated \$2 billion in military aid to Pakistan, asserting it provides safe haven to Taliban and Haqqani network militants.