

# Study looks at religious repression by Axis of Upheaval

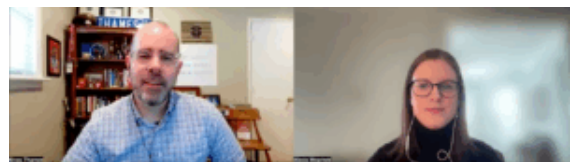
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China, Russia, Iran and North Korea form an “Axis of Upheaval” whose members collude to repress religious freedom both within—and often outside—their borders, a new study says.

“As societies around the world become less free, religious freedom is under global assault, which is also being increasingly coordinated among autocrats, who share their playbooks,” a 74-page report from the McCain Institute of Arizona State University states.

[“The State of Religious Freedom Worldwide”](#) focuses on four authoritarian governments—China, Russia, Iran and North Korea—that “collude to advance their agenda on the world stage—discriminating against religious practices and attacking those who participate ‘illegally,’” the institute’s report states.

## ‘League of tyrants’ engage in persecution



International human rights lawyer Knox Thames and Alexis Mrachek of the McCain Institute respond to questions about a new study focused on religious repression by

China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. (Screen capture image from Zoom call)

In writing the foreword to the study, international human rights lawyer Knox Thames refers to China's Chairman Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian and North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un as a "league of tyrants" whose regimes are "world-class religious persecution machines."

"Not without reason, these four authoritarian regimes are globally renowned for their oppression: they brook no dissent and relentlessly crack down on any political opposition," Thames writes.

He expanded on that idea in a Zoom interview with the *Baptist Standard*.

"The commonality is fear of some type of idea that would lead individuals to pursue something beyond what the regime wants them to think," Thames said. "They are afraid of religion. They are afraid of faith. ... They are afraid of their own people."

The four authoritarian regimes "are able to bring to bear the power of the state to crush any religious activity that they deem illegal or unorthodox," he said.

## **'Industrial-scale persecution'**

Thames noted the "industrial-scale persecution" in China of Uyghur Muslims and Christian churches that "don't play by the Chinese Communist Party's rules."

He also cited Iran's theocratic repression of women who refuse to wear hijabs and persecution of the Baha'i faith and the country's Sufi and Sunni

communities. In North Korea, the government requires worship of the nation's "Supreme Leader."



Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, on Jan. 7, 2021. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

Alexis Mrachek, senior program manager of the human rights and freedom program at the McCain Institute, wrote the chapter in the study on religious repression in Russia and the territories it controls, including occupied areas of Ukraine.

Mrachek pointed to the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Putin regime as an example of the distinction between religious nationalism and freely practiced faith.

"Of course, Russia calls itself a Christian nation. They are officially Orthodox Christian. But really, that is the state's religion, and it's all tied into the politics and power that Putin holds, together with Patriarch Kirill, who is Putin's crony" Mrachek told the *Baptist Standard*.

In Russia, religious identity and national identity are promoted by the state as "one and the same," she noted.

# Recommendations for action

The McCain Institute report includes multiple recommendations for the U.S. government, including:

- Integrate international religious freedom and human rights into foreign policy and diplomatic engagements.
- Expand designations, sanctions and legal measures against nations and leaders of governments that perpetrate severe religious persecution and repression.
- Enforce corporate responsibility and apply economic pressure on countries that violate international standards of protection for freedom of religion and belief.
- Strengthen congressional oversight of actions promoting international religious freedom.
- Amplify support for civil society, religious minorities and freedom of information.
- Counter authoritarian propaganda and influence.

The McCain Institute issued the report on the 27th anniversary of the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998](#), legislation that established freedom of religion or belief as a core objective of U.S. foreign policy.