



Eurac Research Webinar Briefs

Minorities and COVID-19

#2 Covid-19 and Religious Minorities

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As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and its containment measures, particularly 'physical distancing', many religious minorities experience limitations in different aspects of their religious practices. In this brief, we will discuss the specific problems, obstacles, and limitations that religious minorities face compared to majority religious groups and mainstream faiths, and explore measures to prevent discrimination and prejudices against religious minorities.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: Which religious minorities or religious groups are particularly affected by the Covid-19 emergency and which aspects connected to freedom of religion and belief of minority groups are particularly targeted?

Kyriaki Topidi: The pandemic has created a fertile ground for prejudice against minority groups in general by amplifying existing patterns of exclusion. For religious minorities, there is evidence that several groups across the globe have experienced discrimination, for instance Muslims in India (e.g. Tablighi Jamaat group incident), Uighurs in China, the members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in South Korea, the Rohingya in Malaysia, Christians and Ahmadis in Pakistan or Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In Scandinavia, Somali communities appear to have been affected 7-10 times more by Covid-19 than other groups due to lack of access to information about the pandemic.

Kerstin Wonisch: Covid-19 affected particularly the collective dimension of freedom of religion. All across the globe, governments closed places of worship and prohibited religious gatherings, pilgrimages and important collective rites such as the Haj, the celebration of Easter or the Jewish Pesach. The pandemic can serve as an excuse for states to use rhetoric that scapegoats certain minorities, exacerbates tensions between religious groups and justifies further suppressions of already marginalized communities. For instance, religious groups deviating from mainstream Sunni Islam in certain countries in the MENA region are still denied any sort of formal (legal) recognition but are faced with discriminatory practices almost on a daily basis and are even blamed for spreading the virus. Also in the European context, where religion has been a central element for othering and discriminating minority communities for centuries, a rise of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic trends partially fueled by the pandemic, endanger not only Jewish or Muslim communities but society as a whole.

For more details, see e.g. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/state-sponsored-religious-discrimination-rises-pandemic> or <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20214.doc.htm>.

Detlev Rein: All Abrahamic religions have an inner and an outer religious sphere. The inner sphere -- that is the belief itself and the prayers in solitude -- is not affected by the Covid-19 emergency or the measures against it. But the outer sphere, which involves the communal practice of religious services in dedicated places, is intensively touched and changed by restricted admission to services and hygiene rules. The regular religious service is perhaps the most important gathering of believers, but we must also consider the effects on individual events and ceremonies accompanying members of religious communities from birth to death.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: Do you see a difference in the way Covid-19 and the containment measures have affected religious minority groups, in terms of their religious practices or discrimination or hate speech, in comparison to mainstream religious groups?

Kyriaki Topidi: As previously mentioned, religious minority groups have been affected primarily in the collective aspects of the exercise of their religious freedom. The banning of public gatherings, including religious services, is to some extent in line with instructions of the WHO but it is not always clear how governments are using such bans to clamp dissent and religious freedoms. Three aspects within the collective exercise of religious freedom can be mentioned: congregation, with limitations to congregate being viewed at times as limitations to freedom of religion and belief; the practice of religious rites and pastoral care, which social distancing has made harder to adopt (e.g. mourning rites, burials, spiritual support and guidance to the sick); and charitable work, as the lack thereof has placed beneficiaries in danger especially when related to childcare and hunger relief.

Kerstin Wonisch: The pandemic sheds light on how the concept of minorities is framed in a certain socio-geographical context and how it relates to historical developments in a given region. Moreover, constantly changing power-relations in connection with a politicization of religion serve as a pretext for Covid-19-related policies to target religious minorities. Frictions and divisions within and between religious communities serve as an additional excuse for states to limit rights of minority communities, discriminating against, and ultimately persecuting, groups deviating from mainstream religion. Thus, Covid-19 highlights blind spots neglected by policy makers and legislators concerning the meaningful protection of rights of religious minority communities.

Detlev Rein: In all the cases of limits placed on religious practices, the burdens are nearly the same for both members of the majority population and minorities. All religious organisations and believers should jointly ensure that the measures adopted in respect of Corona do not exceed the necessary level of restrictions. However, I see a big difference in the way some right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists react to the spreading of the virus: while they do not focus on Christian religions, Judaism in particular is accused of trying to achieve world domination through a “global Jewish Conspiracy”, which is a crude figment of imagination and deliberate disinformation. This dangerous nonsense appears both in social media as well as in demonstrations.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: Looking toward the future: What role could supra-national organizations, such as the CoE, UN, OSCE and the UN, as well as civil society, activists and watchdog organisations, have to address the rise of discrimination and prejudices against religious groups?

Kyriaki Topidi: Any future action on tackling prejudice connected to religious groups should include state-faith actor partnerships and draw lessons from earlier pandemics. Governments and international institutions should be invited to appreciate the power and complexity of religion in order to design effective outreach efforts to religious minority communities. Knowledge about such groups is therefore essential. At the same time, religious leaders should abstain from conveying inaccurate and polarizing information and focus on encouraging positive behavioral change and adjustment to the pandemic. In addition, international stakeholders and local human rights activists need to remain constantly alert both during ‘ordinary’ as well as ‘extra-ordinary’ times in order to mitigate discrimination against these groups in the long run.

Kerstin Wonisch: Concerted efforts are needed to tackle discrimination of, and prejudices against, religious minorities. This starts with the empowerment and engagement of religious leaders in policy making at local level, and of interfaith councils and initiatives at national level, and continues with the need for legal measures with binding force particularly dedicated to the rights of religious minorities at supra-national level.

Detlev Rein: Awareness campaigns are key, based on current research on the actual trends of discrimination and prejudices. And in this undertaking, all levels of public and private life should be involved, from the United Nations to the Mayor of a small municipality, from the leaders of all majority and minority religious denominations to local church officials. The CoE’s Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention pays special attention to the rights of minorities in times of pandemics and has passed a [statement](#), noting with deep concern that the pandemic has increased the vulnerability of certain national minorities in many countries and has deepened already existing inequalities in many European states.

Watch the full webinar [HERE](#)