

The Freedom of Thought Report 2025

Key Countries Edition

A global report on the rights, legal status and discrimination
against humanists, atheists and the non-religious



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If you have updates, additions, or corrections for this Report, please email: report@humanists.international

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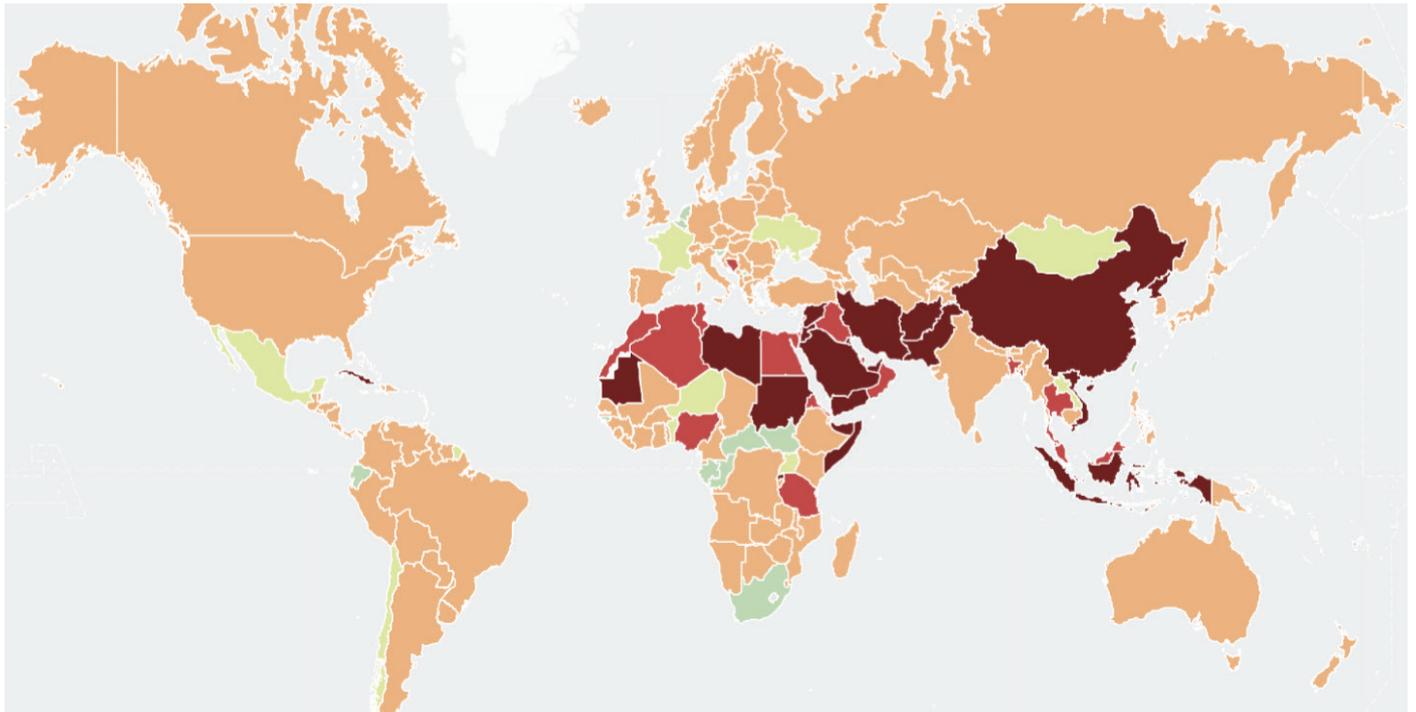
Humanists International is the global representative democratic body of the humanist movement, which unites a diversity of humanist (and other non-religious) organizations and individuals. We want everyone to live a life of dignity in a world where universal human rights are respected and protected, including adherence to political secularism by all states. We work to build, support and represent the global humanist movement by defending human rights, particularly those pertaining to non-religious people, and promoting humanist values world-wide as exemplified in the Amsterdam Declaration (2002).

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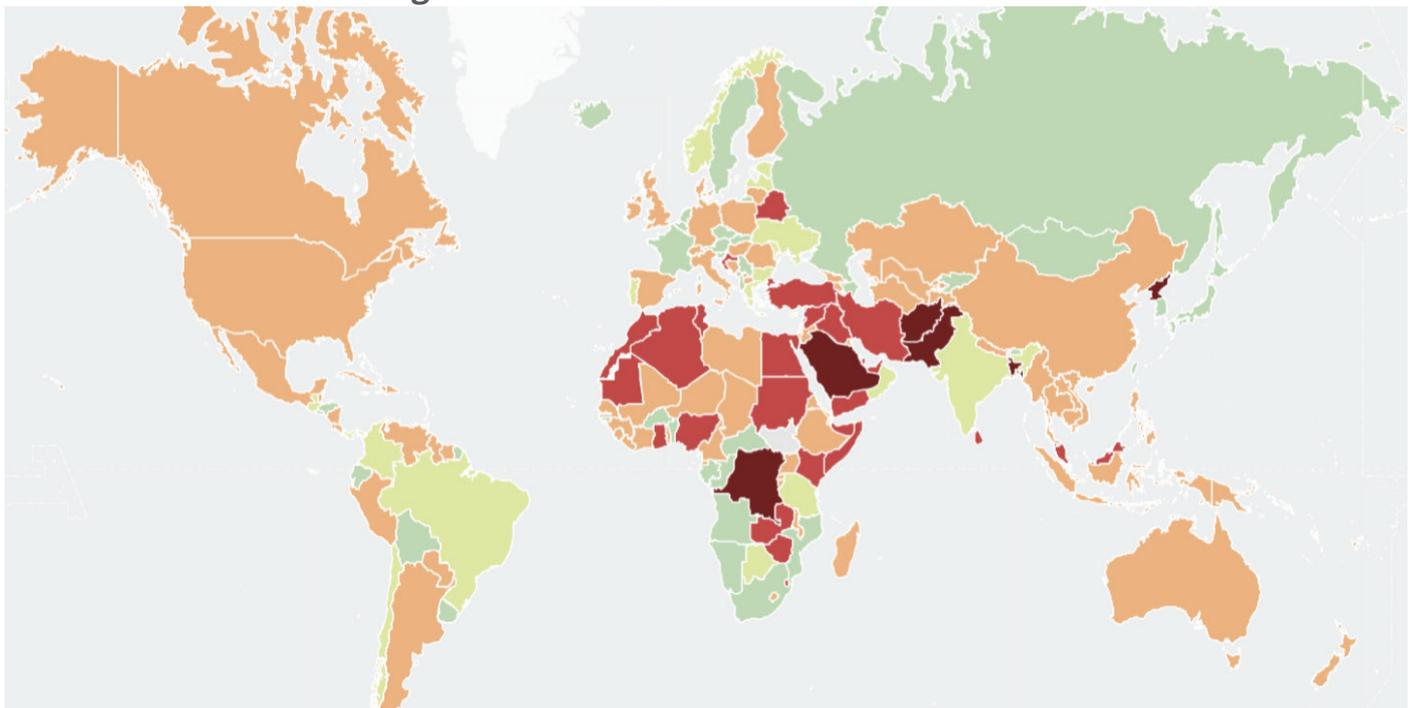
Maps

The maps found on the following pages depict the findings of the full Freedom of Thought Report which is available in a complete Online Edition at [fot.humanists.international](https://www.fot.humanists.international)

Constitution & Government

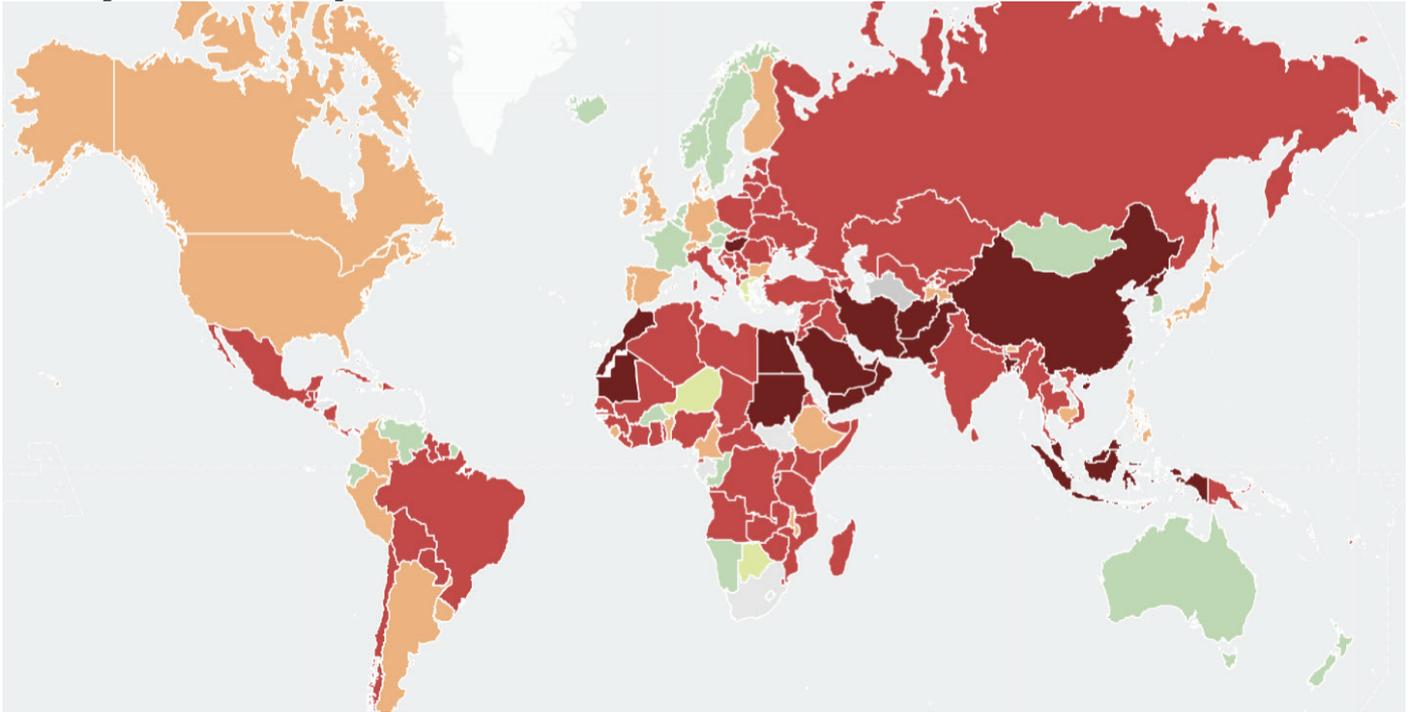


Education & Children's Rights

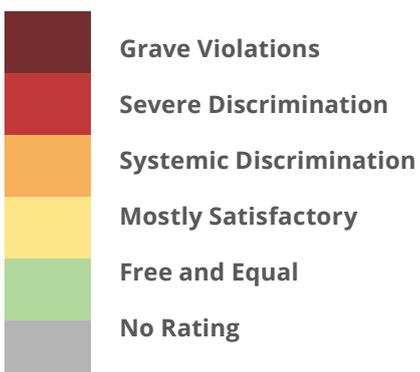
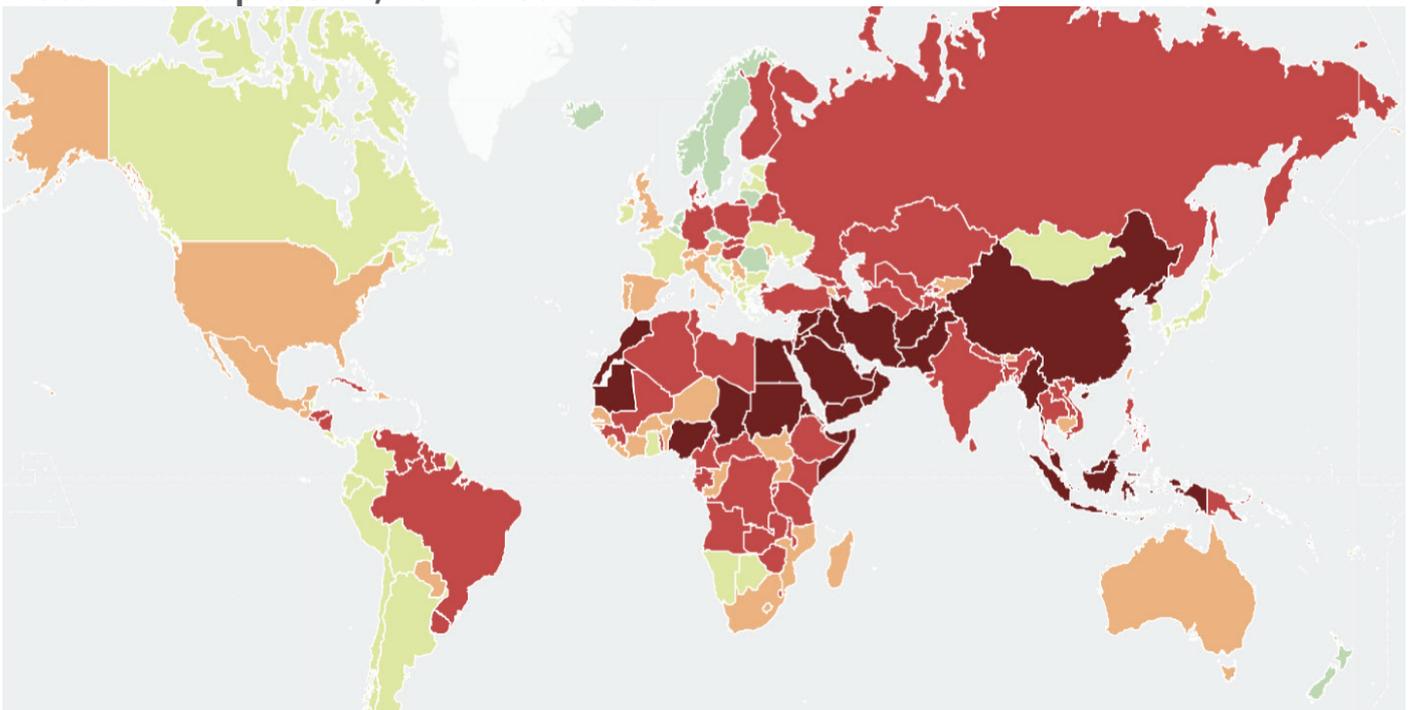


These maps color each country by the level of the most severe boundary condition(s) applied in each category. For example: if the worst boundary condition that is found to apply in the "freedom of expression" category was at the level of "Severe discrimination" then this country will be colored red (see the key, right). For more information see *The Ratings System* on page 15.

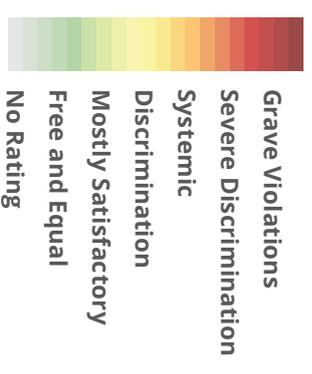
Society & Community



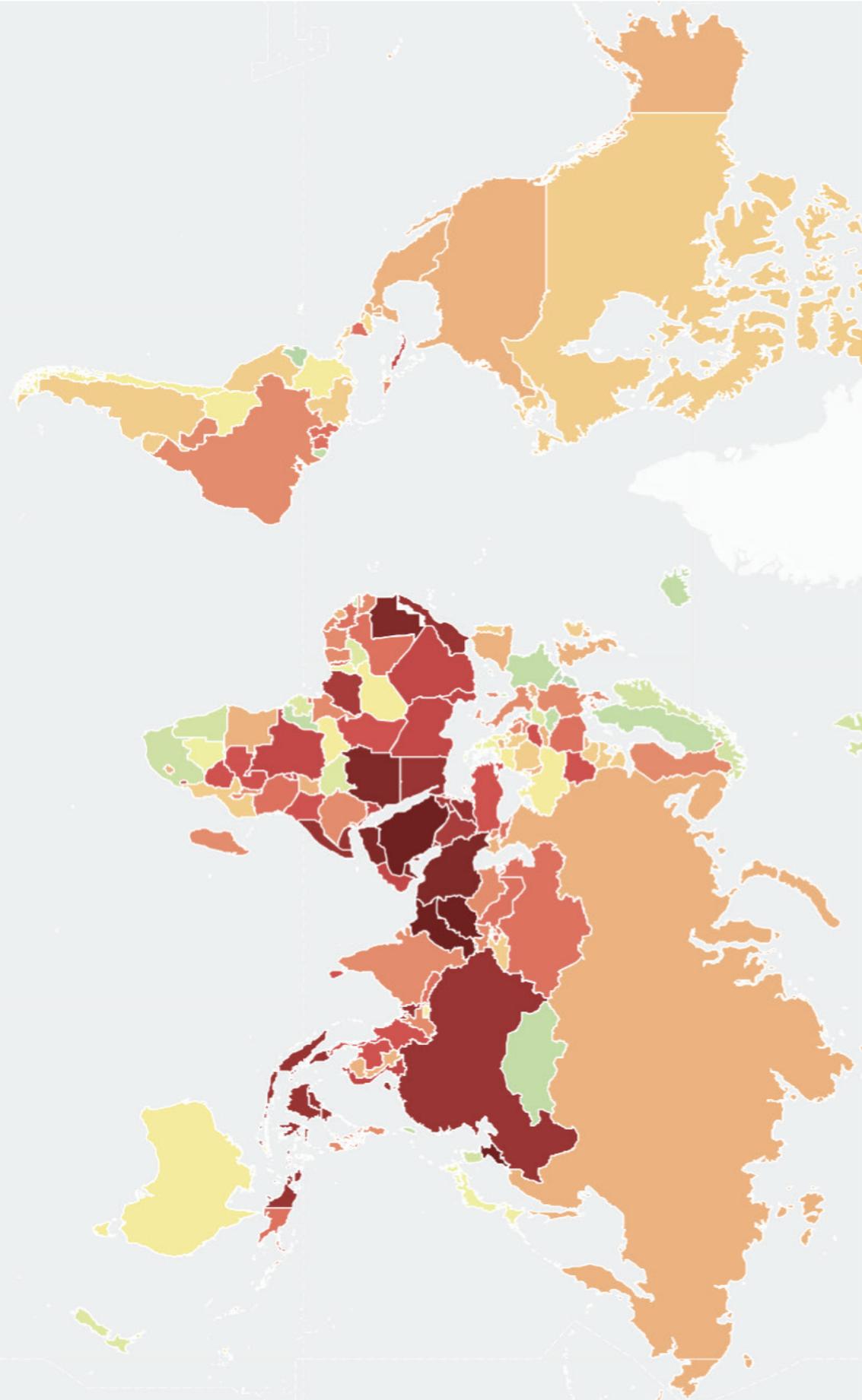
Freedom of expression, humanist values



This map shows the average severity (the "Summary score") across all four categories as a color gradient. The other four maps show the result for each category on its own.



Summary Score



Preface to the 2025 edition

By Maggie Ardiente, President of Humanists International

Over seventy years ago, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) was formed to promote humanist values, secularism, and human rights. Today, we are known as Humanists International, with member organizations from every continent.

As humanists, we are more than our non-belief in supernaturalism or divine beings. We believe in democracy, the right to freedom of religion or belief, and the right to freedom of expression. We strive to ensure that every person - wherever they may be in the world - is respected and can live in dignity. However, in recent years, we have witnessed changes to the world we once knew.

Global freedom has declined for 19 consecutive years, with more countries experiencing a deterioration in political rights and civil liberties than improvements.¹ Human rights organizations across the world have been targeted, discredited, had funding cut, and many have even had to close altogether.² There has also been a significant rise in far-right movements across the world - with many taking power in countries which were once considered to be bastions of democracy and freedom.

As disinformation and misinformation has grown exponentially in the media, populism has emerged as a political force. Populist politicians have entered government in countries across the globe, laying blame for poor economic conditions on minorities and immigrants. The rights that were once cemented in many countries' constitutions and laws have been gradually disintegrating as we witness an alarming slide towards authoritarianism.

Far-right governments and populist movements are increasingly utilizing religion as a political tool to advance their ambitions and to justify curtailing freedoms - often under the guise of protecting the religious freedoms of one religious group at the expense of another. While they may present themselves as defenders of religious freedom and "traditional values," in practice they often push for religious privilege by eroding the human rights of minority groups and dismantling independent democratic institutions.



Maggie Ardiente is President of Humanists International and lives in Washington, DC, USA

The 2025 Freedom of Thought Report Key Countries Edition examines different countries and their record of upholding the rights of freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. We consider issues of legal discrimination and outright persecution and violence. This year's report assesses the social and legal environments that affect the rights of humanists and the non-religious. It features countries where populism and authoritarianism is on the rise - but also where humanist values and human rights have gained acceptance and respect.

The Freedom of Thought Report has been made possible only thanks to our committed member organizations and researchers. They have dedicated their time, knowledge, and expertise to contribute to this report.

References

¹ Yana Gorokhovskaia and Cathryn Grothe, *Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights* (Freedom House, 2025), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/FITW_World2025digitalN.pdf

² Lydia Gichuki, "Aid cuts force humanitarian agencies worldwide to shed staff", *DevelopmentAid*, 8 May 2025, <https://www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/195154/layoffs-across-aid-organizations>

Foreword to the 2025 edition

By Mubarak Bala, former President of the Nigerian Humanist Association

On 28 April 2020, I was at my home in Kaduna state, northern Nigeria, when two plain-clothes police officers arrived at the door. I was told I was being arrested and I was taken to the local police station. Shortly afterwards, I was transferred to neighbouring Kano state police custody - the deeply religious state in which I grew up.

In Kano, I was held without charge for more than a year. During that time, I was denied access to legal representation and to my family, placed in solitary confinement, and denied adequate medical care.

Over a year later, in August 2021, the Kano state High Court formally charged me over so-called “blasphemous” social media posts that they claimed had disturbed public order. Just under a year later, I was given a lengthy prison sentence.

Today, over five years since I was first detained, I am safe and I am free. I am able to share my story and what happened to me.

I was born in northern Nigeria in 1984 in a place known for its conservative religious laws and Sharia courts. As I grew older, I started to learn about other religions and beliefs, and I gradually lost the faith I was born into.

In 2014, after I had publicly renounced Islam, my father arranged for me to be detained against my will in a psychiatric ward and brought in a second doctor - after the first refused, saying that atheism is not a mental illness. My father was formerly a senior member of the Islamic religious authorities and he arranged for the hospital to admit me because I was an “atheist.” I was held for 18 days and I was only able to escape due to a hospital strike during which all patients were discharged.

I started the Northern Nigeria Humanist Movement in 2014 and, shortly afterwards, joined the Humanist Association of Nigeria. Our aim has always been to provide a sense of community for non-religious people across the country and to help ensure that we can live with respect and dignity.



*Mubarak Bala,
former President of the
Nigerian Humanist Association*

For years, we were not allowed to register as an organization. The campaign for formal recognition had begun long before I joined the Humanist Association of Nigeria. After more than a decade of campaigning (involving the Northern Nigeria Humanist Movement, the Atheist Society of Nigeria, and Lagos Humanists), we were finally granted recognition in 2017.

I continued my work at the Humanist Association of Nigeria, becoming President in 2019. I worked with like-minded friends and organizations in Nigeria and across the world. We would sometimes meet in person to discuss humanism and our non-religious views, but we also expressed our opinions online and on social media.

Then in 2020, before I knew what had happened, I found myself in that jail cell in Kano state awaiting sentencing. For the first few months, my friends and family struggled to find out where I was being held. We were not allowed to talk and I hadn't been formally charged with any crime.

I later learned that I was facing charges under Section 210 and 114 of the Kano State Penal Code Law - which relate to insulting religion and disturbing the peace.

During my time in detention, I was surrounded by openly hostile inmates, prison guards, and police officers. I was warned that I should not fight the charges and that, if I did, not only would I be killed, but my family and friends would be targeted. As there had been many instances of people in northern Nigeria being killed for so-called “blasphemy”, it was not a warning to take lightly.

I was given a sentence of 24 years imprisonment under Section 210 of the Kano State Penal Code Law and 16 years under Section 114, with the sentences ordered to run concurrently.

My family and friends had not given up on me. As I was in prison being forced to undertake religious practices I didn't believe in, a global campaign was underway to secure my release.

My friends at the Humanist Association of Nigeria and my legal team had been working tirelessly to help me. They had been on the front line - working with lawyers, speaking to the media, and calling for my release.

Humanists International (which had worked on my case from the beginning) and its member organizations raised my case at the highest levels and launched the global #FreeMubarakBala advocacy campaign.

The donations raised from Humanists International's member organizations and supporters of the campaign enabled my legal team to begin an appeal process. My case was covered by international news agencies and raised by human rights organizations in global forums worldwide. After a long legal battle, my sentence was reduced to five years in May 2024. I was later released for time already served after the Kano State authorities did not file an appeal within the three-month window.

However, I was not safe in Nigeria. Over the past decade, I had received countless death threats, and multiple *fatwas* calling for my death had been issued. With the help of my friends and supporters, I was able to temporarily relocate to Germany on a special German government programme. I am finally able to live and speak freely, but far from the country I call home, and would like to return to one day.

General Introduction

The *Freedom of Thought Report* by Humanists International is a unique annual report and online resource which looks at the rights and treatment of humanists, and the non-religious generally, in every country in the world.

Specifically, this report looks at how non-religious individuals—whether they call themselves atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, or are otherwise just simply not religious—are treated because of their lack of religion or absence of belief in a god. We focus on discrimination by state authorities; that is, systemic, legal or official forms of discrimination and restrictions on freedom of thought, belief, and expression. We also try to include some consideration of extra-legal prosecution or persecution by non-state actors, social discrimination, and personal experience where possible.

In setting the parameters of this survey, we focus on the global human rights agreements that most affect the non-religious: the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief; the right to freedom of expression; and, to some extent, the rights to freedom of assembly and association. We consider national laws that compromise or violate these rights or which otherwise enshrine discrimination against the non-religious. Of course, laws and practices affecting the non-religious often also impact religious groups—usually religious minorities in a national context—so we also consider the corresponding impact of discriminatory laws on other groups. We also consider wider social and ethical issues indicative of the marginalization of humanist values.

Our findings show that the overwhelming majority of countries fail to respect the rights of humanists, atheists, and the non-religious. For example, there are laws that: deny atheists their right to identify; revoke their right to citizenship; restrict their right to marry; obstruct their access to or experience of public education; prohibit them from holding public office; prevent them from working for the state; or criminalize the expression of their views on and criticism of religion. In the worst cases, the state or non-state actors may execute the non-religious for leaving the religion of their parents, deny the rights of atheists to exist, or seek total control over their beliefs and actions.

By limiting the scope of the report to the systemic, legal, or official forms of discrimination—so-called ‘hard’ indicators—the effect of social stigma, non-official discrimination, and other ‘soft’ factors which might affect the lives of the non-religious are underestimated. We acknowledge this limitation, and it is our intention to expand the remit of this report when we have the resources to do so.

In 2020, we were funded by the UK Government to undertake a separate report with a more limited scope into the lived experiences of humanists in eight countries around the world. This report, *The Humanists At Risk: Action Report 2020*, found that in these countries, many humanists reported experiencing bullying, discrimination, ostracism, and social isolation.¹

This year’s Key Countries edition examines 10 countries across the globe that have been updated in 2025, including recent developments in the USA, Malaysia, and Georgia, with all other country entries available online.

A secularizing world

Any rights violations and discrimination are important, even when only small numbers of people are affected. However, the non-religious are not a small group. Atheists (those who do not believe in any god), humanists (those who embrace a morality centered on human welfare and human flourishing that does not appeal to any supernatural or divine entities), and others who consider themselves non-religious constitute a large and growing population across the world. A detailed survey in 2012 revealed that religious people make up 59% of the world’s population, while those who identify as “atheist” make up 13%, and an additional 23% identify as “not religious” (while not self-identifying as “atheist”).² According to the same survey, atheism and the non-religious population are growing rapidly—religious adherence dropped by 9 percentage points and atheism rose by 3 percentage points between 2005 and 2012. Another finding is that religion declines in proportion to the rise in education and personal income, which is a trend that looks set to continue. Even in countries which, at first glance, seem to have few self-identifying non-religious people, it should be remembered that often it is these states or societies that are most oppressive of non-religious views.

Far from thinking that a country with seemingly very few non-religious people is probably not contravening the rights of the non-religious, commentators should recognize that the apparent absence of non-religious voices may well indicate that the non-religious are self-censoring their views in response to oppressive laws or social taboo, or that they are being actively silenced, as this report documents all too often.

Freedom of thought under the human rights framework

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief protects the individual conscience of every human being. This right was first stated by the global community in 1948 in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³ It states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

— Article 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

This simple but powerful statement was given the force of international law by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1976. In 1981, it was given broader application and detail by the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.⁴

Just as freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief protects the right of the individual to follow a religion, it also protects the right to reject any religion or belief, to identify as humanist or atheist, and to manifest non-religious convictions through expression, teaching, and practice. As the UN Human Rights Committee explains (General Comment 22):⁵

“1. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (which includes the freedom to hold beliefs) in article 18.1 is far-reaching and profound; it encompasses freedom of thought on all matters, personal conviction and the commitment to religion or belief, whether manifested individually or in community with others..

2. Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions.”

— General Comment 2022

Thus, it is not necessary to describe atheism as a religion or analogous to religion to guarantee atheists the same protection as religious believers. On the contrary, atheism and theism are protected equally as manifestations of the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

Religious believers and non-believers are equal in human rights because they are all human, irrespective of their religion or beliefs. Just as the profession of religion is protected as a manifestation of belief and conscience, so is the atheist’s criticism of religious beliefs and practices. Just as speaking in support of one’s religious convictions and moral values can be of fundamental meaning and importance to the individual, so can advocating core humanist values of democracy, freedom, rationalism, or campaigning for human rights, equality, and the principles of secularism. As the United Nations says, “religion or belief, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life.”⁶

Article 18 protects atheists’ rights to be atheist and to manifest their atheist beliefs, and non-beliefs, in public and private, in teaching and practice. The right to freedom of religion or belief is therefore central to our examination of the status of atheists and other non-religious people around the world. But there are other rights that are necessary for people to express their conscience, thoughts, and beliefs.

Other rights and freedoms

The right to freedom of expression is not only necessary for people to express their beliefs, but also to explore and exchange ideas. As stated by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to freedom of expression includes the right to share ideas and, crucially, the freedom of the media that is necessary for the free exchange of opinions as well as news:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

— Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In addition to expressing their thoughts through private discussion or public media, people also have the right to associate with others who share those beliefs, and to express their thoughts at meetings, including public assemblies and demonstrations. These rights are protected by Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.”

— Article 20, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

It is no coincidence that these three rights are stated together in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Articles 18, 19, and 20 are intertwined and generally stand or fall together. Our survey, therefore, looks at violations of the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, as well as freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, to show how non-religious people are prevented from, or persecuted for, expressing their atheist ideas or humanist values.

The countries with the worst records on freedom of thought are usually the countries with the worst records on human rights overall. This is no coincidence either: when thought is a crime, no other freedom can survive for very long.

Rights violations and discrimination against the non-religious

"Apostasy" and "blasphemy" laws

In some countries, it is illegal to be, or to identify as, an atheist. Many other countries, while not outlawing people of different religions or no religion, forbid leaving the state religion. In these countries, the punishment prescribed in law for "apostasy" (converting religion or declaring oneself not of a religion) is often death. In fact, for countries in which "apostasy" is punishable, it is punishable with death in whole or in part of the country (Afghanistan, Brunei Darussalam, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Yemen). Pakistan doesn't have a death sentence for "apostasy," but it does for "blasphemy," and the threshold for 'blasphemy' can be very low. Meanwhile, in territories controlled by militant organization, Al-Shabaab, in Somalia, people of non-Muslim faiths and converts from Islam routinely face execution.

More common than crimes relating to simply being an atheist are the criminal measures against expressing atheist views. Many countries have 'blasphemy' laws that outlaw criticism of protected religions, religious beliefs, religious figures, or religious institutions. For example, Pakistan has prosecuted over a thousand people for 'blasphemy' since introducing its current anti-blasphemy laws in 1988. Dozens of those found guilty remain on death row, and there are repeated calls from Islamist leaders to lift the effective moratorium, enforce the death penalty, and make death the only sentence for 'blasphemy' convictions.

The "crime" of criticizing a religion is not always called "blasphemy" or "blasphemous libel." Some countries outlaw "defamation of religion"; sometimes, it is included under hate speech laws (i.e., some hate speech laws outlaw expressions that fall well below any internationally acceptable standard of actually inciting hatred or violence); some quasi-blasphemy laws outlaw instead "hurting religious sentiments" or "insulting religion." As documented in this report, there are legal restrictions against expressing 'blasphemy,'

defaming or insulting religion or religious beliefs, or offending religious feelings, etc. in dozens of countries. "Apostasy" and "blasphemy" laws get a lot of attention because they are often fairly quantifiable, and certainly within the context of human rights discourse, there is a wide consensus that they constitute human rights violations. There are other laws that severely affect those who reject religion, however.

Other discriminatory laws

Some countries have family law that, in effect, excludes atheists from getting married (unless they pretend to be religious) or will remove parental rights from parents known to be atheists. Some countries require that certain public offices be restricted to persons of a particular religion, thereby excluding the non-religious. Some governments require citizens to identify their religion (for example, on state ID cards or passports) but make it illegal, or do not allow, for them to identify as an atheist or as non-religious. Sometimes, the purpose of citizens identifying their religion is not to discriminate against atheists—or any religion—but to ensure government benefits are given to people in accordance with their faith, or that religious laws enforced by religious courts will apply to them on certain matters, especially family matters. However, in many such countries this means that atheists are marginalized.

In fact, discrimination against the non-religious is often caused, not by a desire to hurt atheists, but by the desire to help one or more religions. The promotion of religious privilege by the State is one of the most common forms of discrimination against atheists. Freedom of religion or belief requires equal and just treatment of all people, irrespective of their beliefs. However, when States start to define citizens not by their humanity, but by their membership of a religious group, discrimination automatically follows. For example, as a result of its 15-year-long civil war and with a view to bringing peace to the country, the entire system of government in Lebanon is based on sectarian quotas, with different rights and roles available to Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, and Maronite Christians, etc. This practice not only codifies and encourages religious discrimination, but it also discourages people from leaving the religion of their birth because they will lose all the State privileges that come with belonging to that religion.

Religious privilege is also seen in many countries' public services and public education. The most common and substantial of these privileges is religious control of state-funded schools. For example, in Northern Ireland, 94% of state-funded schools are religious in character.⁷ This not only reinforces sectarianism beyond the school gate, but also excludes the non-religious.

Family law, also known as “personal status law,” is the set of laws that control marriage, divorce, inheritance, child rearing, and child custody—all of family life. More than that, personal status law also determines the individual’s relationship with the community and state. For example, a wife has different legal rights and legal relationships than an unmarried woman. Many Muslim majority countries give control of family law to the Sharia courts operating Muslim, not civil, law. Other countries, usually those with historically large religious minorities, have voluntary religious family courts for the different religious communities. Unfortunately for freethinkers who may have left or want to leave the religion of their family, these “optional” religious family courts can become a trap that is far from voluntary, where opting out may raise suspicions of “apostasy” or threats of social exclusion or abandonment by one’s family. Notably, non-religious women often suffer double discrimination in religious family courts, whereby they are discriminated against not only on the grounds of their belief, but on the grounds of their gender also.

In compiling this evolving annual report, we also find that religious privilege is not only a form of discrimination in and of itself, but it is also a signifier of more general societal discrimination against atheists. When a religion is singled out as special, then it generally follows that the members of that religion receive advantages not available to others. Even when there is just a vague state preference for generic religion or belief in a god, it may reinforce societal prejudice and discrimination against the non-religious. Therefore, we also consider in this report religious discrimination, or religious privilege, even when its supporters claim it is merely ceremonial or symbolic. We agree that some religious signaling by the State is sometimes “only” a matter of symbolism, but what it symbolizes is the State’s preference for religion or for a particular religion, and the second-class status or disfavoring of the non-religious.

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The Ratings System

Every country in this report is assessed against a range of “boundary conditions”. The boundary conditions are statements which may or may not apply to each country. Each boundary condition is associated with one of four thematic strands (these are the vertical columns in the

table below). Also, each boundary condition is placed at a given level of severity (these are the colored horizontal rows in the table below). The following table lists all the possible boundary conditions.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values
GRAVE VIOLATIONS			
<p>Complete tyranny precludes all freedoms of expression and thought, religion or belief</p> <p>Religious authorities have supreme authority over the state</p> <p>State legislation is largely or entirely derived from religious law or by religious authorities</p> <p>Quasi-divine veneration of a ruling elite is enforced, or a single-party regime holds uncontested power, subject to severe punishment</p> <p>The non-religious are barred from holding government office</p>	<p>Religious or ideological indoctrination is utterly pervasive in schools</p> <p>Religious or ideological instruction in a significant number of schools is of a coercive fundamentalist or extremist variety</p>	<p>Expression of non-religious views is severely persecuted, or is rendered almost impossible by severe social stigma, or is highly likely to be met with hatred or violence</p> <p>There is a pattern of impunity or collusion in violence by non-state actors against the non-religious</p> <p>Government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious</p> <p>It is illegal to register an explicitly humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization, or such groups are persecuted by authorities</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights is brutally repressed</p> <p>‘Apostasy’ or conversion from a specific religion is outlawed and punishable by death</p> <p>‘Blasphemy’ or criticism of religion is outlawed and punishable by death</p> <p>It is illegal to advocate secularism or church-state separation, or such advocacy is suppressed</p> <p>It is illegal or unrecognized to identify as an atheist or as non-religious</p>

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values
SEVERE DISCRIMINATION			
<p>The non-religious are barred from some government offices (including posts reserved for particular religions or sects)</p> <p>State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities</p>	<p>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</p>	<p>The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination</p> <p>The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism</p> <p>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</p> <p>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</p> <p>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</p> <p>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</p> <p>It is made difficult to register or operate an explicitly humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted</p> <p>'Apostasy' is outlawed and punishable with a prison sentence</p> <p>'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>

SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION			
<p>There is systematic religious privilege</p> <p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p> <p>There is an established church or state religion</p> <p>Legal or constitutional provisions exclude non-religious views from freedom of belief</p> <p>There is a religious tax or tithing which is compulsory, or which is state-administered and discriminates by precluding non-religious groups</p>	<p>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</p> <p>Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment</p> <p>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in at least some public schools (without secular or humanist alternatives)</p> <p>Some concerns about children's right to specifically religious freedom</p>	<p>Use of Conscientious Objection clauses resulting in the denial of lawful services to women and LGBTI+ people</p> <p>There is significant social marginalization of the non-religious or stigma associated with expressing atheism, humanism, or secularism</p> <p>Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis</p> <p>Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom, or human rights is somewhat restricted</p> <p>Criticism of religion is restricted in law or a de facto 'blasphemy' law is in effect</p>

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values
State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions		Religious groups control some public or social services	

MOSTLY SATISFACTORY

<p>There is a nominal state church with few privileges or progress is being made toward disestablishment</p> <p>Official symbolic deference to religion</p> <p>Anomalous discrimination by local or provincial authorities, or overseas territories</p>	<p>State-funded schools offer religious or ideological instruction with no secular or humanist alternative, but it is optional</p> <p>State-funded schools provide religious education which may be nominally comprehensive but is substantively biased or borderline confessional</p>	<p>Religious courts or tribunals rule directly on some family or 'moral' matters; it is legally an opt-in system, but the possibility of social coercion is very clear</p> <p>Localised or infrequent but recurring and widespread social marginalization or prejudice against the non-religious</p>	<p>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</p> <p>Concerns that secular or religious authorities interfere in specifically religious freedoms</p>
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FREE AND EQUAL

The state is secular, with separation of religious and political authorities, not discriminating against any religion or belief	No formal discrimination in education	No religious tribunals of concern, secular groups operate freely, individuals are not persecuted by the state	No fundamental restrictions on freedom of expression or advocacy of humanist values
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NO RATING

Insufficient information or detail not included in this report	Insufficient information or detail not included in this report	Insufficient information or detail not included in this report	Insufficient information or detail not included in this report
No condition holds in this strand			

Example ratings table for a single country

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values
		Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views	'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence
Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions	Religious instruction is mandatory in at least some public schools (without secular or humanist alternatives)	Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis	Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom of human rights is somewhat restricted
Official symbolic deference to religion			Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious Concerns that secular or religious authorities interfere in specifically religious freedoms

How countries are rated

Only the boundary conditions which are found to apply to a given country are shown in that country's own "ratings table." Here is an example ratings table which would be found on a country's individual page.

In the individual country ratings table, rows at the edges of the table are omitted when no boundary conditions were found to apply in those rows. In the example, there is no green row and no dark red row, because no strand was found to meet boundary conditions at the lowest level or at the highest level of severity.

A "signal light" summary system sits alongside the title of each country on its individual page. The "signal light" shows the worst rating received in each strand. In the example table above, the worst-rated boundary conditions applying in the left-most two strands are both at the middle level of severity: orange. The worst-rated boundary conditions applying in the right-most two strands are both at the second highest level of severity: red. (They don't always come in pairs like this!)

A "signal light" shows that the worst boundary conditions applied in this example were at levels, 3, 3, 4 and 4.

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Here is an example "signal light" summary which corresponds to the example ratings table above.

The "signal light" is designed to give an at-a-glance visual summary of the country's rating within the scope of this report.

Another look at the full list of boundary conditions

It is common for a condition on the more free end of the spectrum (except for the "Free and equal" conditions) to be superseded by a condition on the more severe end of the spectrum. In this case, the less severe condition may remain implicit, and not listed against the country in the report. For example: If blasphemy is punishable

by a maximum sentence of “death,” then the less severe boundary condition stating that blasphemy is punishable by “imprisonment” may be omitted in an individual country’s ratings table.

The table is designed to break the boundary conditions into separate “strands” of concern, allowing for a clearer visualization of what information is available or included in the Report. This means that as we gather more information we will be doing a better job at identifying gaps in our own coverage. As stated in earlier editions of this Report, given the way the ratings are designed, some ratings are likely to get worse over time simply because we are satisfied that additional, more severe boundary conditions have been met.

Omission of a boundary condition in the ratings box does not necessarily mean that that condition does not hold in reality; it may be that that information is missing from the Report. We are always interested in new sources of information.

The bottom, grey row does not contribute toward the “severity” rating of a country. Only the null conditions “No condition holds in this strand” or “Insufficient information or detail not included in this report” appear at this level.

Cautions

It should be noted that this report cannot claim to be exhaustive. While all sovereign nations are recorded in this report, some “overseas territories” are not detailed and are not necessarily without discrimination on freedom of thought. Likewise, the individual cases listed as “Highlighted Cases” in this report are examples, not exhaustive lists.

Lack of transparency in some countries makes comprehensive analysis of those countries more difficult. In some countries, usually among the worst offenders, the secrecy of courts, or state control of media, or lack of reporting, make it impossible to produce a complete account. In some countries, vague laws or broad legal powers delegated to local authorities make it difficult to ascertain exactly how laws are applied (or not applied) on the ground.

We may still be overlooking serious concerns in some countries where we have little on-the-ground contact and the last thing we want to achieve is to make already marginalized non-religious people feel like their problems are being ignored or overlooked because we have given the country a better rating than it deserves, or because we have overlooked issues of concern. If you find yourself in this situation, or you have any other information including mitigation or errata for a given country, please take it as a prompt to reach out to us and make contact via [fot.humanists.international/contact/](https://www.fot.humanists.international/contact/)

Watch List 2025

Following a revision to our editorial policy in 2022, it has now been agreed that each year, one fifth of all countries across the globe are reviewed as part of a rolling cycle of updates. The following are countries that have not been updated in this year's cycle, but that Humanists International continues to monitor closely.

Afghanistan

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Since the takeover by the de facto Taliban authorities in August 2021, the people of Afghanistan have faced worsening human rights crises. "Blasphemy" and "apostasy" have become punishable by death, and a system of Sharia law is now in place. In September 2024, the Taliban's Ministry of Justice reportedly released a statement warning that any criticism of the Taliban's laws will be deemed as criticism of Sharia, and will result in Sharia-based punishment. An untold number of human rights defenders, civil society activists, and religious and belief minorities have been imprisoned for speaking out against the de facto authorities.

For the non-religious, the situation is especially dire. "Blasphemy" and "apostasy" laws, and the accompanying social norms imposed by the Taliban, leaves no space for non-belief, even in private. Many non-religious Afghans have been forced into total concealment of their beliefs or have fled the country, while those who remain live in fear.

Women and girls, in particular, have had their freedoms curtailed. The Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Law, passed in 2024, declared that Afghan women were prohibited from speaking and singing in public. It also introduced stringent dress codes that mandated the complete covering of women's faces outside the home. Women have been denied access to secondary and higher education, barred from most forms of employment, restricted in their freedom of movement without a male guardian, and excluded from public decision-making, amounting to institutionalized gender apartheid.

Amidst these deteriorating circumstances, neighboring countries have deported millions of people to Afghanistan. Those who once fled the Taliban's repression, now risk being persecuted upon forcible refoulement.

Argentina

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

While, historically, a strong advocate for human rights internationally, since the election of Javier Milei in 2023, Argentina has seen a decline in the human rights situation in the country. Milei's time in office has been defined by obstacles to freedom of expression and protest, and increasingly hostile rhetoric against minorities, including LGBTI+ people. In 2025, the government announced Argentina's withdrawal from international organizations (such as the WHO), introduced a ban on gender-affirming care for people under 18 years old, and reduced support for public health initiatives, sparking international condemnation.

In October 2025, the US agreed to bailout Argentina on the condition that Milei's party succeeded in the legislative midterms. The country's longstanding poor

economic position has also provided a pretext for cuts to social programs and state human rights programs, leaving civil society and human rights defenders even more vulnerable. Humanists, secular activists, and marginalized belief communities face growing challenges in advocating for freedom of thought, expression, and equality, as the political and legal environment becomes increasingly hostile.

Against this backdrop, the Catholic Church retains a preferential place in Argentina. This has always presented a challenge for secular activists and civil society organizations working on sexual and reproductive health rights, but with the new government, the environment for such activists has, and is likely to, deteriorate further.

Hungary

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary's government has pursued increasingly authoritarian policies, including discriminating against women and LGBTI+ people, scapegoating migrants, and shrinking civil society space. Orbán has committed to aligning the country with Christian values and often justifies rights restrictions with the need to protect Hungary's traditions. This is supported by the Hungarian Constitution, which obligates all state institutions to protect the "Christian culture of Hungary."

A particular focus has been the instrumentalization of children's rights to enact repressive laws, such as banning the promotion of LGBTI+ content to children. Measures passed in March 2025 also allowed officials to ban Pride marches and use facial recognition technology to identify and prosecute participants, resulting in Pride marches being effectively banned nationwide and criminal investigations being opened against several organizers. Relatedly, the transfer of state schools to church ownership accelerated in 2024 and 2025, leaving them

as the only viable option in certain localities. Church-run schools benefit from substantially higher state subsidies than public schools, can make their religious education classes mandatory, and may discriminate in the selection of pupils and teachers on the basis of religious affiliation. Broad concerns about the unequal treatment of religious minorities and the non-religious were raised by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2025.

A proposed Hungarian "foreign agents"-style law, first tabled in May 2025, threatens to penalize NGOs that receive foreign funding and are deemed to threaten Hungary's sovereignty. The bill broadly defines such threats to include undermining Hungary's Christian culture or questioning the primacy of marriage, the family, and biological sex. Civil society, including humanists and minority religious or belief groups, face onerous administrative burdens and the risk of being investigated, defunded, and dissolved.

India

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Most international reporting in 2025 has focused on India's economy, from stalled trade deal talks with the US to an outperforming economy. However, behind these headlines, there remain serious causes for concern.

Despite its famously secular Constitution, Hindu nationalism and inter-religious tensions have risen under the premiership of Narendra Modi. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has promoted Hindu nationalist rhetoric to the detriment of the country's religious and belief minorities, which has often included justifying violence against minority groups. Additionally, laws like the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act have been used to harass civil society actors.

While India is constitutionally a secular state, several atheists, humanists, and rationalists have been killed by vigilantes.

Recently, the President of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, Narendra Nayak, was named on several assassination 'hit lists.' As a result, from 2016 until 2023 police protection was provided for him. That protection was removed without explanation in 2023 and has not been reinstated, despite an international campaign for its reinstatement led by Humanists International.

Other minorities face their own challenges. Sikhs face discrimination within India and prominent Sikhs have allegedly been targeted for assassination by Indian intelligence abroad. Muslims face demonizing political rhetoric and social discrimination. Dalits - members of the lowest class in India's caste system - face continued economic and social exclusion. Meanwhile, Rajasthan - a state in northwest India - has also recently passed the country's strictest anti-conversion bill, and many religious and belief minorities face increasing pressures as a result.

Iran

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Since the revolution in 1979, decades of state-imposed religion in Iran has made life treacherous for religious and belief minorities. Iran's government jails and periodically executes dozens of individuals on charges of "enmity against God." Such laws are used not only to punish religious minorities, but also political opponents.

In this climate, humanists, atheists, and other non-religious individuals face severe legal and social persecution. "Apostasy" and "blasphemy" laws are routinely applied to suppress freedom of thought, and those advocating for secularism or human rights are often targeted. The ongoing repression has created a

highly precarious environment for civil society, limiting avenues for safe activism and international engagement. Since the Women, Life, Freedom protests of 2022, the Iranian government has continued to execute imprisoned dissidents, and Humanists International has highlighted several of these cases internationally. Protests once again flared in December 2025, and they have been met with further repression by the Iranian government. Meanwhile, actions by external actors like the US and Israel, from sanctions to air strikes, have also been used by the government to justify its tightening control over the population.

Israel

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Since the 7 October 2023 terrorist attack - when 1,195 people, including 815 civilians, were killed and 251 people were taken as hostages by members of the terrorist group, Hamas, and its affiliates - Israel's government has become decidedly more autocratic. Attempts to undermine judicial independence, freedom of expression, and constrain civil society have been largely successful. In Gaza, the ensuing response by Israel has led to the destruction of much of the territory, and a combination of air strikes and drone strikes, kinetic military action, and the blocking of access to resources, has resulted in the reported deaths of over 70,000 people.

While the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has not yet issued a final judgment in the Genocide Convention case concerning Israel's conduct in Gaza, numerous credible human rights organizations, UN bodies, and UN mandate holders have alleged that serious crimes have been committed - including crimes against humanity and, according to some assessments, genocide. Meanwhile the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his then-Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant. Despite a ceasefire, more than 500 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli airstrikes or gunfire.

Against this backdrop, internal repression has heightened. Protests have been suppressed by police, with little tolerance of dissent. Arab citizens of Israel, who often identify as Palestinian, face discrimination in most areas of life. They also face violence and abuse at the hands of the Israeli police and security forces. Simultaneously, Jewish extremists have carried out attacks against Palestinians and Arab-Israelis - including in the West Bank - often without accountability, contributing to a climate of impunity.

In many ways, the current coalition government has worked to enshrine religious privilege even further in law. A bill expanding the powers of Rabbinical courts was passed in 2025, strengthening Orthodox control over personal status and civil matters. Ministers have also come under political pressure from ultra-Orthodox parties opposing efforts to end long-standing exemptions from military conscription for Haredi men. Meanwhile, humanists, secular Jews, and non-religious individuals report increasing pressure to conform to religious norms and self-censor political expression, particularly in education, public institutions, and the military.

Nepal

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Nepal transitioned from being a Hindu state to a secular democratic republic in 2008, after a decade-long war between Maoist rebels and the government. However, Nepal's secularism has faced numerous challenges since it was enshrined in the Constitution in 2015. Restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief, including provisions in Nepal's 2017 Penal Code that criminalize "blasphemy," have heralded a growing tide of Hindu nationalism within the country.

Alongside these legal developments, organized Hindu nationalist campaigns have intensified in recent years. They promote narratives that frame secularism as a foreign imposition and portray religious minorities,

humanists, and civil society organizations as threats to national identity. Such campaigns have consisted of misinformation, hate speech, and pressure on state institutions - which has contributed to a climate of hostility towards pluralism and dissenting belief.

In 2025, the so-called Gen Z protests led to the storming of the Nepalese parliament and the resignation of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, who was shortly thereafter replaced by former Chief Justice Sushila Karki. With elections scheduled for early 2026, there is no shortage of potential flashpoints. Against this backdrop, nationalist rhetoric may rise and Hindu-Muslim tensions could be exacerbated and exploited by opportunistic politicians.

Pakistan

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Pakistan's legal and constitutional framework privileges Islam and enables severe restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief. The government frequently prosecutes and enforces "blasphemy" laws, including those which can carry the death penalty. These prosecutions also provide a pretext for vigilante mob violence, and attacks against those accused of "blasphemy" left at least four dead in 2024. Pakistan's "blasphemy" laws are often used to target political opponents or to settle personal feuds, or against religious and belief minorities, including humanists and members of the Ahmadiyya community.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's government, in office since February 2024, has conducted a severe crackdown on civil society and dissent through various legal and extralegal means. For example, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 has been used against women journalists to silence their reporting, and authorities have deployed broad cybercrime and public order provisions against online expression critical of religion or the state.

Reports of violence against minorities - and impunity for such violence - increased in 2025, despite a resolution of the Pakistan National Assembly in June 2024 which urged federal and provincial governments to ensure the security of all Pakistani citizens.

At the beginning of 2025, UNHCR reported Pakistan was hosting around 1.6 million Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers, including many who fled Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in 2021. In late 2023, Pakistan announced the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan, which has since involved arrests, detentions, and the forcible return of Afghans. It has created a climate of fear for many Afghans in Pakistan, as those with well-founded fears of persecution - including women and girls, journalists, human-rights defenders, religious minorities, and the non-religious - face the risk of serious human rights violations upon their return.

Palestine

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Notwithstanding the severe issues Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank face from repressive laws (such as those discriminating against women and LGBTI+ persons), Israel's years-long blockade of Gaza and annexation of parts of the West Bank - in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions - have shaped life for Palestinians.

Since Israel's military campaign in Gaza began in October 2023, conditions have further deteriorated, amidst an increasing number of allegations of crimes against humanity and genocide. Over 70,000 people are reported to have lost their lives in Gaza, over 100,000 have been injured, and, in August 2025, a famine was declared. Hundreds of Palestinians have been killed since the October 2025 ceasefire amid sporadic violence, and preventable deaths have been exacerbated by the ongoing humanitarian crisis and Israel's aid blockade.

Palestinians in Gaza have faced repeated - and often contradictory - evacuation orders from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), severely restricting their movement. Additionally, air strikes have hit areas previously designated by the IDF as humanitarian zones. Under these conditions, civilians in Gaza have found it extremely difficult to exercise their rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. Following the 7 October attacks, Israeli authorities have arrested at least 140 journalists in the West Bank and closed down 12 printing presses and 15 media outlets. In Gaza, UN experts have reported that at least 248 journalists have been killed as of September 2025.

Across the Palestinian territories, places of worship have been attacked and access to religious sites has been restricted. In Gaza, churches and mosques have been bombed, and in the West Bank, Israeli settler violence has resulted in damage to mosques.

Russia

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Russia's authoritarian government has become even more repressive in recent years, cracking down on independent media and civil society, smearing and harassing anti-war activists and LGBTI+ people, and prosecuting opposition figures and groups. The government has championed "traditional values" to reject internationally recognized standards of human rights and justify its authoritarian practices. Opposition to "Western values" is framed as a defense of religion and, especially in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as a matter of national security. The Russian Orthodox Church has continued to deepen its ties with the government, benefitting from enormous state privileges while shoring up support for government policies, including the war in Ukraine.

Authorities have continued to expand Russia's arsenal of repressive laws and have targeted human rights defenders with stigmatizing labels, fines, and prison sentences. In 2025, the government introduced changes to Russia's anti-extremism legislation that made it easier to arbitrarily outlaw entire groups. The authorities declared a wave of civil society organizations - including

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International - "undesirable," which bans them from operating in Russia and criminalizes engagement with them. Several prominent human rights defenders were also convicted on spurious charges.

Authorities have continued to censor content depicting LGBTI+ people and have fined book stores, streaming services, and individuals for showing such content. Prosecutions using de facto "blasphemy" laws have intensified since 2022, with several convictions taking place in 2025. In June 2025, it was announced that a new mandatory subject, "Russia's Spiritual and Moral Culture," would be introduced in Russian schools from September 2026. The textbook planned to be used for the subject was co-authored by a senior Russian Orthodox bishop known for ultra-conservative views. Russian Orthodox priests have also expanded anti-abortion initiatives, with anti-abortion prayer services performed nationwide and, in one region, priests have been directed to visit health clinics to dissuade women from having abortions.

Key Countries Edition

This “Key Countries Edition” of the *Freedom of Thought Report* contains some of the entries which have been updated this year. These country chapters are a sample only. The full report is available in the Online Edition via the website at fot.humanists.international where every country in the world is featured with its own webpage and interactive ratings table.

Bangladesh

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression
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Formerly part of India, and subsequently forming the eastern wing of Pakistan that was carved out of India in 1947 when British colonial rule ended; Bangladesh is located in the northeastern region of the Indian subcontinent, and has been independent since 1971. Following its independence, Bangladesh experienced coups d'état, periods of military rule, and political upheaval until parliamentary democracy was restored in 1991. Sheikh Hasina rose to prominence in the 1980s as a leading pro-democracy campaigner against military rule, and was elected prime minister in June 1996. However, the country's last elections that international observers considered to be free and fair were in 2008.¹

In August 2024, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's increasingly authoritarian Awami League government was ousted following public demonstrations. Hasina resigned and fled the country and an interim administration – led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus – was sworn in soon after and promised accountability and reform. Despite the changes, there were reports that some patterns of abuse by the security forces remained.²

According to the 2022 Census, 91% of the population are Muslim, 8% Hindu, the remaining 1% comprises Buddhists, Christians and other minority religious groups. The census does not record the number of non-religious people living in the country.³

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities	Religious or ideological instruction in a significant number of schools is of a coercive fundamentalist or extremist variety	<p>Expression of non-religious views is severely persecuted, or is rendered almost impossible by severe social stigma, or is highly likely to be met with hatred or violence</p> <p>There is a pattern of impunity or collusion in violence by non-state actors against the non-religious</p>	Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted

		<p>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</p> <p>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</p> <p>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</p> <p>It is made difficult to register or operate an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization</p>	<p>'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto 'blasphemy' laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>
<p>There is an established church or state religion</p>	<p>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</p> <p>Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment</p>		

Constitution and government

Political turmoil and ongoing uncertainty

Since coming to power in 2009, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government gradually consolidated power. Her increasingly autocratic leadership became characterized by the harassment and arbitrary arrest of activists, crackdowns on protest – including the use of sweeping internet shutdowns – and the use of enforced disappearance against her opponents. Opposition parties have boycotted elections, including in January 2024, when Sheikh Hasina secured her fourth consecutive term in office.⁴

In August 2024, Sheikh Hasina's government was removed from power following its brutal repression of public demonstrations. The protests began as peaceful student demonstrations against discriminatory and politicized quotas in government jobs. The movement later grew into nationwide protests calling for governmental reform. An interim government headed by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, who was appointed Chief Adviser, promised accountability and reform. However, Human Rights Watch reports that,

“Due to the deeply ingrained systemic obstacles to accountable governance, a disturbingly familiar

pattern of security force abuses and political reprisals has reemerged, this time targeting perceived Awami League supporters.”⁵

In the first months of governing, the interim government established eleven commissions in two phases to make reform and policy recommendations. The first phase was aimed at recommendations to reform the judiciary, the electoral system, public administration, police, the anti-corruption office, and the Constitution. The second had the goal of forming policy recommendations on media, health, labor rights, and women's rights.⁶

Media reports have indicated that the Constitutional Commission recommended sweeping reforms to the Constitution that propose to establish a bicameral parliament and to revise the fundamental principles of the State.⁷

From secularism to pluralism: current constitutional guarantees and proposed constitutional reform

The 1972 Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (last amended in 2018)⁸ and other laws and policies guarantee freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as freedom of opinion and expression. However, certain laws and policies continue to restrict

freedom of religion or belief, as well as freedom of expression and media freedom.

Article 8 of the Constitution includes secularism as one of the four fundamental principles of the State used to guide the governance of the country, including in the creation of all laws. Article 12 elaborates on how secularism is to be ensured:

“The principle of secularism shall be realised by the elimination of –

- (a) communalism in all its forms;
- (b) the granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion;
- (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes;
- (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.”

A constitutional amendment passed in 2011 reaffirmed secularism while retaining Article 2A, which declares Islam as the state religion but allows for the “equal status and equal right” to practice Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions. The amended Constitution includes further provisions elaborating on freedom of religion, such as Article 28 which prohibits “discrimination by the State against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.” Article 39 also declares that “freedom of thought and conscience is guaranteed,” but also states that it is subject to “public order, “decency,” or “morality.”

Among key recommendations made by the Constitutional Reform Commission in January 2025, the Commission recommended the deletion of Articles 8 and 12 of the Constitution, among others. In response to concerns raised about the removal of secularism, the head of the Commission, Ali Riaz, argued that secularism as professed and practiced by the Hasina regime was “limited to toleration of religious diversity.” Riaz indicated that the inclusion of the term “pluralism” is wider in scope and therefore “more encompassing” of the country’s long tradition of pluralism – be it cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic.⁹ Riaz stated,

“Pluralism, by definition, professes the coexistence of people of various backgrounds and ensures equal participation in social and political lives. It will not only address religious diversity such as Hindus, Buddhists, Ahmadis and Bahais but will also be inclusive to other marginalized sections of the people, such as Dalits and people of third gender. Interestingly, despite having secularism as a state principle, minority persecution went unabated for decades.”¹⁰

Under the recommendations, the Constitution would retain Islam as the State religion. In justifying this recommendation, Riaz referred to consultations with stakeholders, including 50,000 survey responses, as well as the existence of a State religion or reference to “faith in Almighty” in over 80 countries across the globe. He stated,

“The Bangladeshi state’s relationship with religion under the revised constitution as recommended by the [Constitutional Reform Commission] would not be different from past decades. Until religion acts as the source of legal measures or challenges the politico-legal institutions, there are few reasons to be alarmed. Often state religions are more symbolic than substantive.”¹¹

The interim government has recommended that the Constitution’s founding principles be revised and nationalism, socialism, and secularism are removed, while equality, human dignity, social justice, and pluralism are added. The Constitutional Reform Commission has also called for the inclusion of the right to food, education, healthcare and the right to vote – new rights not previously recognized in the Constitution.¹²

As of late 2025, the interim leadership backed a cross-party reform charter, the “July National Charter,” which is linked to a national referendum planned to be held alongside the planned February 2026 parliamentary election.¹³

Education and children’s rights

Article 41(2) of the 1972 Constitution states:

“No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or to take part in or to attend any religious ceremony or worship, if that instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own.”

Providers of education may broadly be grouped as follows: (a) public and private schools and *madrassahs* – Islamic educational institutions – that follow the national curriculum including both secular and religious subjects; (b) unregistered and autonomous Quomi *madrassahs* that follow Deobandi curricula – these schools are generally independently managed and locally funded while offering Islamic education for free or for a minimal cost; and (c) schools that follow a British curriculum.¹⁴

There are often an insufficient number of teachers that provide education for students from religious minority groups in Bangladeshi schools. In instances where students are from a minority faith, parents or local religious groups typically hold classes outside of school hours and students are exempted from religious education in the school setting. For Islamic, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist students, religious education of their respective faith is mandatory and part of the curriculum found in public schools.¹⁵

There is no provision for religious education in the national curriculum for children who do not adhere to one of the four major religions. Moreover, the system offers no institutionalized interreligious/interfaith learning opportunities.¹⁶

Private schools are not required to teach religious education. Both Catholic and Islamic religious groups run a significant number of educational institutions.¹⁷

Bangladeshi *madrassahs* are broadly grouped under two categories: *madrassahs* under the purview of the government's Madrassah Education Board, the Alia *madrassahs*, and autonomous Quomi *madrassahs*. However, other groups also run largely unregulated *madrassahs*. *Madrassahs* in Bangladesh are almost entirely established and managed by non-state actors. Only three *madrassahs* are reported to be completely State-funded. There is no consensus on the actual number of privately-run *madrassahs* due to their largely unregulated nature and lack of any comprehensive survey.¹⁸

The Alia *madrassahs* system, which offers a 16 year-long education, is regulated by the Bangladesh Madrassah Education Board (BMEB) under the Ministry of Education that centrally manages the financial, curricular, assessment, and degree offering responsibilities. As part of the public-private partnership, the government pays salaries for teachers and administrators of selected Alia *madrassahs*.¹⁹

The Quomi system also follows a loosely constructed Dars-i-Nizami curriculum, which is Quran and Hadith based. Several of these *madrassahs* reportedly teach secular subjects such as Bangla and English language and literature, geography, history, and mathematics up to Grade 8. However, how much academic attention is given to these subjects along with questions and assessments around teacher quality is uncertain.²⁰

In 2017, following the intervention of Islamic religious scholars, a number of poems and other content deemed to be "atheistic" were removed from textbooks. The changes followed years of lobbying and protests coordinated by Hefazat-e Islam – a coalition of Islamist organizations²¹ – to demand changes to textbooks, mandatory religious education and punishment for "atheist bloggers".²²

Child marriage

The minimum legal age for marriage in Bangladesh is 18 years for girls and 21 for boys.²³

However, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017²⁴ includes a loophole where a court can allow child marriage in "special circumstances as may be prescribed by rules in the best interests of the minor, at the directions of the court and with consent of the parents or the guardian of the minor" (Article 19). The vague wording of the provision has led advocacy groups such as Girls Not Brides to fear that "this loophole will allow girls under 18 in cases of rape and early pregnancy to marry their perpetrators to avoid social stigma and shame."

A report released by the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics in March 2024 indicates that the incidence of child marriage is increasing in the country. Almost 42% of young women in Bangladesh were married before

they had turned 18, 8% before the age of 15.²⁵ Child marriage is reported to be more prevalent in rural areas, and correlated to school drop out rates. Drivers of child marriage are reported to include poverty, traditional gender norms and conceptions of "honor", and climate emergencies.²⁶ Media reports indicate that few child marriages are officially registered.²⁷

Family, community and society

Religious influence in family law

Laws concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption differ significantly depending on the religious beliefs and genders of the persons involved. Women typically fare worse in terms of the extent of the rights and benefits afforded to them compared to men in family law. Muslim and Hindu family laws are codified in the legal system and are enforced in secular courts.²⁸

The family laws of the religions of the two parties concerned govern their marriage rituals and proceedings. Interreligious marriage is subject to considerable social stigma, and is possible to varying degrees based on the gender and religious background of the persons involved. For example, under the Muslim family ordinance, a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim; men, by contrast, may marry women from other Abrahamic faiths.²⁹

The long out-dated and ambiguous 1872 Special Marriage Act³⁰ allows Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, and the non-religious to marry outside of their religion. Couples married under this act are not allowed to adopt; succession, maintenance, custody and guardianship of children and inheritance is not clearly defined either, creating an unclear legal situation.

With both parties' agreement, certain family and civil disputes may be resolved through alternative processes rather than court proceedings. Lawyers, court officials, or community leaders may be selected to support mediation or arbitration and the outcome may later be presented in court. Such alternative processes do not apply to disputes over land ownership.³¹

Islamic Sharia law plays some role in civil matters pertaining to the Muslim community.³² There is no formal implementation of Sharia, and it is theoretically not imposed on non-Muslims, however there is a very high likelihood that some non-religious individuals would be presumed religious and socially pressured to conform to religious arbitration in family matters.³³

Women's rights

Social and cultural norms, alongside prevailing patriarchal attitudes, impose discriminatory and stereotypical roles, rights and responsibilities according to gender.³⁴

As indicated above, religious personal laws governing women's rights in relation to marriage, divorce, maintenance and property inheritance are largely discriminatory against women.

According to Human Rights Watch, sexual and gender-based violence are widespread and women and girls in Bangladesh have little recourse to seek protection or access justice for these crimes.³⁵

LGBTI+ rights

Same-sex conduct is criminalized under Section 377 of the Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860)³⁶ with penalties from ten years to life in prison. There are no legal protections against discrimination on the basis of sexuality, and LGBTI+ organizations face obstacles to operating in the country.³⁷ LGBTI+ people and advocates have reported increased threats of violence.³⁸

Due to social taboos and societal pressure to conform to heterosexual, cultural and religious norms, including marriage and having children, the majority of LGBTI+ people in Bangladesh are reported to choose to keep their sexual orientation a private matter to avoid discrimination, social exclusion and hostility from their families and wider society.³⁹ Further, according to a report by the International Republican Institute, "The intersection of religiosity and family honor forced many participants [in their focus groups] into a tenuous agreement with their families to hide their sexual or gender orientation in public."⁴⁰

Conversion practices – reportedly performed by individuals, family members, medical professionals, and religious and community leaders – are widespread.⁴¹

Religious tension

After Sheikh Hasina's government was toppled in early August 2024, reports quickly emerged of communal attacks on religious minorities, and particularly the Hindu and Ahmadiyya communities.⁴² In response, human rights groups, such as Amnesty International, called on the interim government to ensure that minority religious groups were protected and investigations were carried out to ensure accountability.⁴³

Since then, observers have continued to document abuses and intimidation affecting minority religious communities, alongside ongoing allegations that ethnic minorities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts face discrimination and violence involving State security forces. As Bangladesh approaches the February 2026 national elections, there have been reports of a renewed rise in attacks on religious minorities and increasing violence against women and girls.⁴⁴ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) also reported that, while the interim authorities said they made arrests related to attacks on distinct religious and indigenous groups, many perpetrators of the violence continued to enjoy impunity.⁴⁵

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, subject to limitations to maintain "public order." While Bangladesh's media landscape is vibrant and diverse, authorities have imposed serious restrictions on freedom of expression, particularly to suppress criticism. Several legislative restrictions unduly restrict the right to freedom of expression, including provisions within the Penal Code that make criminal defamation,⁴⁶ sedition⁴⁷ and religious insult offenses. To date, these provisions have been used to imprison activists, writers, bloggers and journalists critical of the authorities. This in turn has led to self censorship on some religious and political topics.

In September 2023, amid growing domestic and international condemnation, the government replaced the previously abusive Digital Security Act (DSA) with the Cyber Security Act, 2023 (CSA).⁴⁸ Although framed as a more moderate alternative, the CSA retained several controversial provisions, including sections that criminalize "hurting religious sentiments" and "disrupting communal harmony". The CSA grants arbitrary powers to law enforcement for arrest, search, and seizure, and empowering authorities to block or filter content with minimal oversight.⁴⁹

On 4 November 2023, the law was used to arrest 19-year-old atheist blogger Selim Khan after a fellow member of a private Facebook group for atheists photographed a comment made by Khan and shared it publicly, "causing public agitation."⁵⁰ Khan was subsequently released on bail, but remained in jail due to procedural delays.⁵¹

In May 2025, the interim government repealed the CSA and replaced it with the Cyber Security Ordinance. However, the freedom of expression organization, ARTICLE 19, reported that the interim government failed to conduct meaningful consultations with stakeholders when formulating the draft version of the law.⁵² Civil society groups and human rights organizations have cautioned that the new 2025 law still relies on vague and ambiguous concepts that can be used to criminalize legitimate expression – including criticism of religious dogma. In late 2025, the government also moved to dismiss many legacy cases brought under the 2018 Digital Security Act, through amendments associated with the Cyber Security Ordinance.⁵³

According to Human Rights Watch, "As of November [2024], authorities had filed murder charges against at least 140 journalists in relation to their reporting on the Monsoon Revolution and scrapped more than 150 press accreditations required to attend official events. When questioned about the criminal cases targeting journalists, Chief Adviser Yunus said that the charges had been filed "following the old laws and practices," underscoring the point that without systemic reform, the target of police will change but the abusive practices will remain the same."⁵⁴

Freethought under threat

The failure of the authorities to bring the perpetrators of murders of freethinkers (see ‘Highlighted cases’ below) to justice and the lack of security provided to any bloggers under threat lead to a stifling climate for free expression. In addition, police and government officials threatened to arrest bloggers for writing about “atheism” or simply advised them that they should stop writing about atheism if they wished to be safe.⁵⁵

De facto “blasphemy” laws

Chapter XV of the Penal Code⁵⁶ provides for several criminal offenses related to religion, including defiling places of worship, interrupting services and trespassing on burial grounds. Several provisions in this chapter have been used to prosecute and imprison atheist and secularist activists.

Section 295A states:

“Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of the citizens of Bangladesh, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.”

Section 298 states:

“Whoever, with the deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings of any person, utters any word or makes any sound in the hearing of that person or makes any gesture in the sight of that person or places any object in the sight of that person, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both.”

Documented “hurting religious sentiment” arrests have reportedly continued under the interim government.⁵⁷

Enforced disappearances

The use of enforced disappearances as a means of stifling criticism became characteristic of the Sheikh Hasina era. It is estimated that more than 700 people were forcibly disappeared between 2009 and 2024.⁵⁸

Following the fall of Hasina’s government, the interim government established a Commission of Inquiry into all enforced disappearances and acceded to the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances.⁵⁹

Freedom of assembly

In July 2024, violence erupted after Hasina’s Awami League party supporters and police attacked students peacefully protesting a politicized quota scheme for government jobs. Security forces used excessive force, including

tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber and live bullets, to disperse protesters. Protests continued until Hasina stepped down and fled the country. A UN fact-finding mission later concluded that the former government was complicit in gross human rights violations in connection with the repression of the protests.⁶⁰

Highlighted cases

In July 2020, police indicated that they were seeking to arrest human rights activist and secular blogger Asaduzzaman Noor, also known as Asad Noor, after new criminal charges were brought against him under the Digital Security Act on July 14 for ‘spreading rumours’ and ‘defaming Islam’ via a Facebook video.⁶¹ Noor had previously been targeted under the DSA’s predecessor, the 2013 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act. In January 2017, the then 25-year old was arrested at Dhaka airport and charged with defamation of religion for content he had posted on social media.⁶² Though released briefly on bail in August 2018, he was subsequently re-arrested after a radical Islamic organization known as Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh called for him to be imprisoned and subjected to the death penalty. He was only released from prison again in January 2019. These charges against him remain outstanding. He lives in hiding following threats to his life.

Between 2013-2018 several humanist or freethinking authors, bloggers and secular publishers were attacked, many of them killed. In February, 2013, the atheist blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider (pen name: Thaba Baba), was murdered in a machete attack at his home. Avijit Roy, an author of books on humanism and science, was killed in February 2015 outside the International Book Fair at Dhaka University, his wife Rafida Ahmed was also seriously hurt in the same attack; Washiqur Rahman Babu, a young blogger known as a “progressive freethinker”, was killed in March 2015; Ananta Bijoy Das, who blogged against fundamentalism, in favour of science, justice, and free expression, was struck down in May 2015; Niladri Chatterjee (penname: Niloy Neel), a humanist known as much for his blogging on minority and women’s rights as for his atheistic views, was killed in his own home in front of his partner in August 2015; and on 31 October 2015, coordinated gun and machete attacks on two publishing houses in Dhaka – both publishers of books by Avijit Roy and other secular authors – took the life of Faysal Arefin Dipon (Jagriti publishers), and seriously injured Ahmed Rashid Tutul (Shuddho-Shor publishers), author and blogger Randipam Basu and poet Tareq Rahim; Xulhaz Mannan, founder of the nation’s first LGBTQ+ magazine was killed at his home in April 2016; that same month, writer Rezaul Karim Siddique, an English professor, and Nazimuddin Samad, an atheist blogger, were killed in separate attacks; in 2018, after a year-long break in killings, publisher, blogger and secular political activist, Shahzahan Bachchu was killed.

The feminist author and atheist activist Taslima Nasrin remains in exile from Bangladesh because of the threat of death or government persecution should she return to her homeland.

Testimonies

"Bangladesh is a country where even if you kill or rape, no one will hate you as much as if they find out you are an atheist. You might already know about the killing of bloggers and atheists in Bangladesh? Since 2013, more than 20 atheists have been hacked to death by Islamic groups. I have received thousands of death threats as a human rights film-maker and writer."

- Sahadat, 14 June 2023

"[The new law banning "defamation of religion"] has now become almost a fear instigating tool inside Bangladesh against any Atheist or non-believer. This is the tool Pakistan used to rapidly turn into a fundamentalist, broken nation. That we see today, Bangladesh is not far."

- Anonymous

"If you are a true activist, you are the most vulnerable person in the country. You could be arrested by the government or be targeted by an Islamist."

- Bangladeshi secular activist

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El Salvador

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

El Salvador – officially the Republic of El Salvador – is the smallest and the most densely populated country in Central America. Between 1980-1992, the military-led government and left-wing guerillas waged a civil war that resulted in the deaths or disappearances of at least 75,000 citizens.¹ The effects of the civil war are felt to this day, leaving behind a legacy of impunity² and gang violence.³

In the midst of a cultural transformation, the distribution of religious affiliations in El Salvador has changed significantly in recent years. According to a survey by

LPG Datos, 38% of Salvadorans identify as Catholic, 38% as Evangelical, and 20% as non-religious.⁴ Historically a predominantly Catholic nation, this shift reflects a notable decrease in the number of Catholics, and an increase in Evangelicals and people without religious affiliation. This trend is particularly pronounced among people under 36, where Evangelicals are now the majority.⁵

Research from the Forum for Reflection on Salvadoran Reality (FORES) also shows that religion remains a fundamental pillar in Salvadoran culture, although it is experiencing significant challenges and evolutions due to increasing religious diversity and global social changes.⁶

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
		The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination	Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted 'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto 'blasphemy' laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence
There is systematic religious privilege State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions			
Official symbolic deference to religion			
	No formal discrimination in education		

Constitution and government

Democratic backsliding

Reforms enacted under the presidency of President Bukele and his *Nuevas Ideas* government have sparked concern that the political landscape is moving back towards authoritarianism almost three decades after the end of the civil war.⁷ The declaration of a state of emergency in March 2022 has been repeatedly renewed

and remains in force at the time of writing – resulting in significant democratic backsliding, and the removal of checks and balances.⁸ President Bukele was re-elected for a second term in February 2024 with 84% of the votes despite longstanding constitutional provisions prohibiting consecutive terms in office.⁹ In July 2025, a constitutional amendment was passed by Bukele's *Nuevas Ideas* party that enables indefinite presidential re-election and extends presidential terms from five to six years while removing run-off elections.¹⁰

In April 2024, El Salvador's Legislative Assembly – dominated by President Nayib Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party – approved an amendment to Article 248 of El Salvador's Constitution which creates a fast-track pathway for constitutional amendments. The change was ratified in January 2025 and eliminates the requirement that constitutional amendments be approved by two successive legislatures – raising serious concerns about public consultation and scrutiny.¹¹

Over several years, the super-majority of the ruling party in the Legislative Assembly has been pivotal in eroding judicial independence, weakening accountability mechanisms, and systematically violating due process guarantees.¹²

Legal framework

The Constitution¹³ and other laws and policies guarantee freedom of religion or belief, as well as freedom of expression (Article 6), freedom of assembly, and freedom of association (Article 7).

The Constitution states that all persons are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on nationality, race, gender, or religion (Article 3).

Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees:

“The free exercise of all religions, without limitation other than those based on morality or public order.”¹⁴

The Constitution bars ministers of any religious denomination from belonging to political parties or standing for elected office (Article 82). It also prohibits them from engaging in political propaganda in any form.

The final clause of Article 7 of the Constitution prohibits the existence of armed groups of a political, religious or unionized nature.

Official symbolic deference to religion

The concept of a deity is present in national symbols, including the preamble to the Constitution, and the State's motto “God, Union, Freedom”.¹⁵ The second Sunday of December is designated as the National Day of the Bible.¹⁶ The 23rd November is observed as the National Day of Prayer.¹⁷

In July 2021, the legislative assembly passed an amendment to the Law on Patriotic Symbols¹⁸ to include the phrase “Placing our faith in God” (“Puesta Nuestra Fe en Dios”). The amendment ensures that the phrase may now be placed on the walls of State buildings and rooms.¹⁹

In response to criticism, a minister reportedly explained that “[t]he presence of God is something personal, there is no intention of forcing anyone to believe because we live in a free country [...] It is to leave a mark among the deputies who now represent this legislature.”

Since assuming the presidency in 2019, President Bukele has repeatedly resorted to religious rhetoric, quoting directly from the Bible. He has regularly encouraged prayer, and used his powers of presidential decree to designate national days of prayer.²⁰ Upon his re-election in February 2024, he attributed the improvements in security to God “who wanted to cure our country”. Reflecting on his own statements, he said,

“I can see the headlines now, ‘Bukele mentions God, but the State should be secular’. They [international critics] even want to make us atheist. We respect all religions, we respect atheists, agnostics. We respect them, and we are friends, but let us believe in God if we want to. Let us give Him the glory if we want to.”²¹

Religious privileges and exemptions

Article 26 of the Constitution gives explicit constitutional recognition to the Catholic Church. Religious groups often pursue registration with the relevant government authority to benefit from tax exemptions and to enable donations to be treated as tax-deductible under the law.²² Non-Catholic groups register as associations or foundations with the Ministry of the Interior and, under Article 231 of the Constitution, churches designated for religious services are exempt from paying property tax.²³

Education and children's rights

In January 2023, the Grow Together for the Comprehensive Protection of Infancy, Childhood, and Adolescence Law (*Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia*)²⁴ superseded previous legislation governing the rights of children. Article 105 enshrines children's rights to the freedoms of thought, conscience and religion stating,

“Children and adolescents have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which will be exercised in accordance with their evolutionary development, without limits beyond those that are prescribed by Law that are necessary to protect their security and respect for the rights of others.

“The family, society and the State shall guide children and adolescents in the practice of these freedoms, and guarantee their exercise by creating the necessary support mechanisms that contribute to their comprehensive development and in accordance with the principle of equality, non-discrimination, and equity.

“Educational establishments have the duty to respect the culture and religion of children and adolescents, and not restrict, undermine or censor the exercise of these freedoms. In any case, those who attend private religious education centers must respect their practices and teachings, without violating the principle of their best interests.”²⁵

Furthermore, Article 58 of the Constitution prohibits schools from discriminating in the admission of students owing to the “nature of the union of their parents or guardians, or social, religious, racial or political differences.”²⁶

Religious education

State schooling is officially secular and does not include a religious education component. Religious groups may run private schools without government funding, but all private institutions – religious or otherwise – must satisfy Ministry of Education standards. Parents decide whether their children receive religious instruction in the private system, and Article 105 of the Grow Together law requires students attending private establishments to “respect their practices and teachings.”²⁷

Repeated calls by legislators to require the reading of the Bible in schools have consistently been rebuffed, most recently in 2019.²⁸ However, a recent study conducted by Francisco Gavidia University reportedly indicates that 95% of Salvadorans are in favor of the reading of the Bible in schools.²⁹

Comprehensive sexuality education

Article 33 of the Grow Together law guarantees all children and adolescents without exception the right to “receive comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health care” noting the fundamental role of the family in ensuring the exercise of this right.

The right is further emphasized in Article 47, which emphasizes the obligation of all public and private schools to comply with Article 33.

However, President Bukele has taken a firm stance against the promotion of “gender ideologies” in schools.³⁰ Such terminology is often used to challenge the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education in schools.

Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference in the US, President Bukele is reported to have stated that,

“I think it is important to bring God back to schools, to bring back morality, civic responsibility, to learn traditional things, like math and history. No one is against modernizing, what we are against is inculcating unnatural, anti-God, anti-family ideologies that have no place in our schools.”³¹

February 2024 statements made by the Minister for Education that “all trace of gender ideology has been removed from public schools,” have been criticized by civil society as violating the Grow Together Law.³² The President of the Citizen’s Group for the Decriminalization of Abortion (Agrupación Ciudadana por la Despenalización del Aborto), Morena Herrera, emphasized that the removal of comprehensive sexuality education from the curriculum should be “considered a crime, because

it is the removal of a right, above all in a country with such high levels of child sexual abuse and high rates of pregnancy among girl children and adolescents.”³³ Data indicates that children and adolescents account for at least a third of all pregnancies.³⁴

Family, community and society

A legacy of impunity and gang violence

Between 1980-1992, the military-led government and left-wing guerillas waged a civil war that resulted in the deaths or disappearances of at least 75,000 citizens. Members of the Catholic Church, including Archbishop Romero, were prominent campaigners against human rights abuses during the 1980-1992 civil war, and several members of the clergy were targets for assassination.³⁵ The quest for justice for all those affected remains ongoing.

Militarism and violence did not abate following the signing of the Peace Accords. Refugees who had fled to the US during the civil war and formed gangs were deported back to El Salvador, where they continued their gang activity.³⁶ At the height of the violence, gangs exerted tremendous control over residents’ daily lives and were operational in over 94% of El Salvador’s municipalities.³⁷

In March 2022, the Legislative Assembly adopted a state of emergency that suspended certain basic freedoms following an escalation in gang violence. The state of emergency remains in force to date following multiple extensions that the government has asserted is necessary to address gang violence in the country.

Human rights organizations and the United Nations have raised serious concerns about the state of emergency, citing reports of arbitrary detentions, deaths in custody, and torture.³⁸ In December 2024, Amnesty International stated that,

“What the government calls ‘peace’ is actually an illusion intended to hide a repressive system, a structure of control and oppression that abuses its power and disregards the rights of those who were already invisible—people living in poverty, under state stigma, and marginalization—all in the name of a supposed security defined in a very narrow way”³⁹

Through the state of emergency, the authorities have conducted sweeping raids and arrests. Human rights groups estimate that 81,000 people have been detained as part of the campaign, many of whom are not thought to have demonstrable links to gangs.⁴⁰

A number of religious groups, including the Catholic Church have reported a breakdown in communication between the Church and the state. In the wake of the state of emergency, groups working to rehabilitate former gang members have become more cautious about raising human rights issues.⁴¹

However, at the same time, President Bukele has reportedly commented, “These pastors are right: God can redeem anyone. God and God alone can forgive their sins and save them. If God forgives them, they will enjoy eternal life. But here on Earth they still must face the consequences of their actions.”⁴²

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

El Salvador maintains a total ban on abortion (Articles 133-137 of the Penal Code).⁴³

Penalties for women seeking abortions range from two to 50 years in prison. Women thought to have had an abortion may be convicted of the crime of “abortion” in the first 20 weeks of pregnancy; in cases where pregnancies are further along, women may be charged with manslaughter, homicide (Article 128 of the Penal Code), or aggravated homicide (Article 129 of the Penal Code). This is even the case where women have suffered complications during their pregnancy which have resulted in miscarriage or stillbirth, but where others suspect that the pregnancy was aborted.⁴⁴

The ban was enacted in 1997 following lobbying by conservative religious groups – including evangelical and pentecostal Christians – who continue to protest any loosening of the restrictions that have been proposed in the legislative assembly.⁴⁵

In December 2024, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that El Salvador had violated the human rights of a woman denied an abortion despite her high risk pregnancy. The court ordered the State to adopt “all necessary regulatory measures” so that doctors are authorized to terminate “pregnancies that pose a risk to the woman’s life and health.”⁴⁶ The ruling does not bind the country to amend its laws, and the prospect remains unlikely given President Bukele’s outspoken opposition to doing so.⁴⁷

In May 2024, the new Legislative Assembly eliminated several specialized legislative commissions, including its Commission on Women and Gender Equality, in existence since 2009.⁴⁸

LGBTI+ rights

Members of the LGBTI+ community face pervasive discrimination and are the target of hate crimes by police, gangs, and members of the general public.⁴⁹ Same-sex marriage is illegal.⁵⁰

In June 2024, President Bukele dismissed over 300 employees from the Ministry of Culture, citing their promotion of an agenda incompatible with his government’s vision.⁵¹ According to ILGA World, the decision followed the cancellation of a production of a drag play at the National Theater previously authorized by the ministry. It had been staged for one day when it sparked controversy over its allegedly “unsuitable content for Salvadoran families.”⁵²

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Article 6 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and media freedom, however, these rights have been increasingly undermined in practice with officials attempting to discredit the work of journalists and civil society actors, including by labeling them as defenders of gangs.⁵³

De facto “blasphemy” law

Article 296 of El Salvador’s Penal Code (‘Attacks against freedom of religion’) criminalizes not only interference with worship (impeding, interrupting, or disturbing the free exercise of a religion), but also public conduct that is considered to offend religion and religious traditions. It also criminalizes the destruction of – or damage to – objects used for religious worship. Punishment under Article 296 carries a sentence of six months to two years, which increases to one to three years if the act is aimed at creating publicity.⁵⁴

Attacks on the media

As a result of the harassment and surveillance they face, journalists critical of the authorities are increasingly opting to self-censor.⁵⁵

In 2022, amendments made to the Penal Code paved the way for journalists to serve between 10 and 15 years in prison if they shared gang messaging that “could cause anxiety and panic among the general population. The vague wording of the clauses effectively stifles reporting on gang violence in the country.”⁵⁶

Attacks on human rights defenders

Under the current administration, non-governmental organizations have largely been excluded from engagement with policymakers.⁵⁷

President Bukele’s government has reportedly targeted civil society groups, including journalists and human rights groups, both through smear campaigns and the threat of criminal prosecution.⁵⁸

The State has used the state of emergency to justify the arbitrary detention of human rights defenders. Most of these cases involved people defending land, territory and natural resources, and labor rights, according to Amnesty International.⁵⁹

“Foreign Agents” law

In June 2025, President Bukele’s Nuevas Ideas party brought into force a “Foreign Agents”⁶⁰ law under Decree 308 which lays out regulations, obligations and prohibitions for any person or organization the government considers to be a “foreign agent.” Under Article 3, the law deems a “foreign agent” those that

“carry out activities... that serve the interests of, are controlled by, or are financed directly or indirectly by a foreign principal...including non-profit associations and foundations.”

“Foreign agents” are required to register and are prohibited from activities “for political or other purposes” that the government deems affect “public order”, “national security”, or “social and political stability.” Those that register are subject to a 30% tax on funds received and transactions. The government may also “monitor the activities of foreign agents.” The law stipulates that failure to comply with the obligations will result in administrative and criminal liabilities ranging from USD 100,000 to USD 150,000 for failures to comply with Article 8, and from USD 150,000 to USD 250,000 for violations of Article 9.

The “Foreign Agents” law has been widely condemned by human rights groups and international observers as a deliberate attempt to control, silence, and punish civil society and those critical of the government. It mirrors similar “foreign agent” laws which have emerged under increasingly authoritarian regimes across the world that have been used to restrict freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and the legitimate work of non-governmental organizations.⁶¹

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La familia, la sociedad y el Estado deberán orientar a las niñas, niños y adolescentes sobre la práctica de estas libertades, y garantizar su ejercicio creando los mecanismos de apoyo necesarios que contribuyan a su desarrollo integral y en atención al principio de igualdad, no discriminación y equidad.

Los centros educativos o de formación tienen el deber de respetar la cultura y religión de las niñas, niños y adolescentes y no restringir, menoscabar o censurar el ejercicio de estas libertades.

En todo caso, aquellos que asistan a centros privados de educación de carácter religioso, deberán respetar las prácticas y enseñanzas de éstos, sin violentar el principio de interés superior."

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Georgia

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

A former Soviet republic which declared its independence in 1991, Georgia is today a semi-presidential republic, lying at the intersection of Europe and Asia. While Georgia experienced a period of democratization from 2013 until 2017, observers consider that Georgia has experienced significant democratic and human rights backsliding since 2023.¹ The V-Dem Institute downgraded Georgia from an “electoral democracy” to an “electoral autocracy” in 2025, noting that the 2024 election year “marked the largest one-year decline since Georgia’s independence.”²

The northern regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia declared independence from Georgia in the 1990s – though there is little international recognition for their independence – and Georgia considers them part of its sovereign territory. Following the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008, both territories have been under Russian

occupation. In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that Russia has effective control of the territories and can be held responsible for human rights violations in the two regions.³

In November 2024, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced that Georgia would suspend its European Union (EU) accession efforts until 2028, after the EU halted the process as a result of the country moving “away from the European Union, away from its values and principles.”⁴

According to the most recently published census in 2014, 83.4% of Georgians identified as Christian Orthodox, followed by Muslims at 10.7%.⁵ Only 1.73% did not provide an answer, or responded “none,” when asked whether they were religious.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
		<p>The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination</p> <p>The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism</p> <p>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</p> <p>It is made difficult to register or operate an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted</p>

There is systematic religious privilege

Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general

There is an established church or state religion

State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions

There is state funding of at least some religious schools

Constitution and government

Article 16 of the Constitution of Georgia⁶ guarantees freedom of belief, religion and conscience for all. In 2017, the Parliament of Georgia drafted amendments to the Constitution that would allow restrictions to Article 16 under ambiguous terms including “state security,” “prevention of crime,” and “administering justice.” The proposed changes were heavily criticized by the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission and civil society.⁷ After being initially adopted, the parliament amended Article 16 in 2018 to allow restrictions only “for ensuring public safety, or for protecting health or the rights of others, insofar as is necessary in a democratic society.”⁸

The Constitution and government policy confer special status and privileges to the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). Article 8 recognizes the GOC’s “outstanding role [...] in the history of Georgia” and its independence from the State, but also allows for a “constitutional agreement” (known as the “Concordat”) to be signed between the State and the Church.⁹ The Concordat was signed in 2002 and confers a unique status upon the GOC; the government does not have a similar agreement with any other religious group. It confers rights not given to other religious groups, including legal immunity for the GOC patriarch, the exclusive right to staff the military chaplaincy, and exemption of GOC clergy from military service.¹⁰ Clergy from other religious groups are not granted such privileges and must perform a non-military, alternative labor service. The Concordat recognizes GOC wedding ceremonies. However, a marriage is only legally recognized after civil registration with the State. Additionally, the Concordat provides special privileges in the area of education (including the GOC’s right to teach religious studies in public schools and the State’s authority to pay for Georgian Orthodox religious schools) but these education provisions have not yet been implemented.¹¹

Other religious communities may register with the National Agency of the Public Registry as a legal entity under public law or as a non-commercial entity, both of which grant legal recognition, tax exemptions, and the right to own property and operate a bank account.¹²

Non-registered communities can still conduct religious activities and own property. While legal entities under public law must have a historic link with the country or be recognized as a religion by Council of Europe member states, this requirement does not apply to non-commercial entities. The governmental body dedicated to engagement with religious communities, the State Agency for Religious Issues, has been criticized by civil society for seemingly being focused on the monitoring and control of religious minorities.¹³ The Agency’s Interreligious Council includes 12 religious organizations but no humanist or other non-religious worldview organizations.

Financially, the Concordat and other legislation grant the GOC compensation for material and moral damages inflicted during Soviet times and exempt the Church from several taxes applicable to other religious groups, including property tax on land used for non-commercial purposes and taxes on the import or sale of religious goods.¹⁴ In 2018, an existing tax exemption for the construction, restoration, or maintenance of churches and cathedrals by the GOC Patriarchate was declared unconstitutional. However, a new provision introduced in 2020, mentioning “cathedrals” and “church buildings,” retains Christian terminology and remains religiously non-neutral. As in previous years, the GOC Patriarchate received GEL 25 million (approx. USD 9.3 million) in 2024 from the national government as symbolic compensation, as well as another GEL 39,364,180 (approx. USD 14.5 million) for various institutions under the authority of the GOC and a large amount of real estate. Typically, the Church receives another GEL 5–7 million (approx. USD 1.9–2.6 million) from local governments. Since 2014, four other religious organizations (Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Armenian Apostolic) have received state funding as symbolic compensation as well, totalling GEL 6.5 million (approx. USD 2.4 million) in 2024.¹⁵ Furthermore, the GOC is the only religious organization that may receive state property free of charge or directly purchase it, and it is granted ownership over state forests near GOC churches and monasteries.¹⁶

Georgia does not include religious affiliation in identity documents,¹⁷ and contributions to religious groups are voluntary and not state-administered.

Education and children's rights

Georgia's Law on General Education¹⁸ upholds the principle of religious neutrality in public schools, abolishing compulsory religious courses, banning religious indoctrination and proselytization, removing religious objects from schools, and allowing religious rituals to take place only after school hours.¹⁹ However, according to various local and international reports, the law is frequently violated or circumvented.²⁰ In 2022, the UN Human Rights Committee raised concerns about "allegations of stigmatization, pressure to convert, and harassment against members of religious minorities" in public schools.²¹

According to civil society reporting, the national curriculum and textbooks often reflect a majoritarian and exclusionary vision of Georgian society. For instance, school textbooks are said to fail to represent Georgia's ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity and to negatively stereotype beliefs and ethnicities perceived as non-Georgian.²² The 2024 "Document of National Goals of General Education" removed liberal values and terms such as "discrimination", which were present in the 2004 version. Also in 2024, a textbook approval process that involved human rights experts reviewing content for non-discrimination, was stopped by the Ministry of Education.²³

About 11% of pupils attend private schools as of 2025.²⁴ Roughly a quarter of all private schools are Orthodox schools, which are under control of the GOC Patriarchate. In 2025, the government allocated GEL 43 million (approx. USD 15.5 million) to fund these educational institutions, which are usually free or charge nominal fees.²⁵ Other private schools do not receive state funding.

Serious concern has been raised in recent years about the abuse and mistreatment of children in the Ninotsminda St Nino Children's Boarding School, an orphanage which is run by the Georgian Orthodox Church. Several children came forward with allegations of physical and psychological abuse, including insults, food and sleep deprivation for several days, confinement, and corporal punishment. Even after the Public Defender (ombudsperson) raised concerns about the school in a 2015 report, and repeatedly afterwards, the orphanage continued to operate legally and the authorities failed to investigate. After a visit in 2016, the Public Defender was denied her right to access the institution, with the bishop responsible for the institution stating that people who approve of same-sex marriages "should not be allowed into orphanages or any family in general."²⁶ It was only when judicial and administrative authorities started to intervene in 2021, that the Public Defender was eventually able to conduct a visit.²⁷

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a decision in 2024 that Georgian authorities failed to effectively investigate and address the child abuse, and a case is pending in front of the European Court of Human

Rights.²⁸ The Committee is also more broadly concerned about the "significant number of children residing in non-licensed residential care institutions, including religious ones, and the lack of monitoring of the conditions in such institutions."²⁹

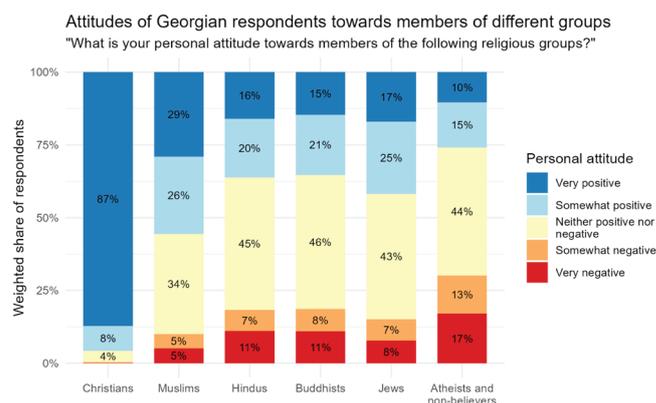
Although Georgia set the minimum legal age of marriage at 18 years old with no exceptions in 2017, child and forced marriages persist – especially in rural areas. Girls, in particular, can be subject to informal or "cultural" marriages, which are meant to circumvent the prohibition.³⁰ Child marriage rates are said to be one of the highest in Eastern Europe with 13.9% of women aged 20–24 married before 18, according to one study.³¹ The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women also raised concern about the fact that not all child marriages are considered forced marriages under Georgian law.³²

Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals

The Georgian Orthodox Church remains one of the most trusted institutions in the country. For a long time, being an Orthodox believer was considered an essential part of being a "true" Georgian (next to being ethnically Georgian and speaking the language). However, a 2020 survey found that such an ethno-religious definition of identity is no longer predominant. Only 50% of respondents agreed that Georgian citizens should be Orthodox Christians while only 29% agreed that they should be ethnic Georgians.³³ However, the same survey found that 79% of respondents still view the GOC as the foundation of Georgian identity, and 80% see it as promoting the preservation of moral values.

Social prejudice against the non-religious

According to the latest data from the International Social Survey Programme, which Humanists International has conducted an analysis of in the figure below, negative attitudes towards the non-religious in Georgia are higher than towards any religious group. 30% of respondents have a "very" or "somewhat" negative attitude towards atheists and non-believers, compared with 15% for Jews and 10% for Muslims.³⁴ Only 10% of respondents have a very positive attitude towards atheists.



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Non-religiousness is often portrayed as immoral and anti-GOC, as well as negatively associated with the West and liberal values. Around the 2024 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream-led government rallied against human rights, civil society, and the West in the name of protecting the GOC, traditions, and “family values.” Human rights defenders, critical media, civil society, and opposition politicians were smeared as “blasphemers,” “enemies of the Church,” and “fighting against Christian values.” For instance, Georgian Parliament speaker Shalva Papuashvili stated that the election is a “choice between evil and good, ungodliness and spirituality.”³⁵ At the same time, Orthodox clergy spread similar anti-West, anti-human rights messages about the opposition and civil society. They also linked the Georgian Dream governing party to the protection of the Church and preservation of Christian values and traditions. A central theme of that messaging by the clergy was its opposition to “Western” “LGBT propaganda.”³⁶

LGBTI+ rights

Georgia has seen a cascade of legislative changes in recent years that undermines the rights of LGBTI+ persons, paired with the rise of political homophobia and high levels of societal discrimination and hostility. The GOC, the Georgian Dream governing party, and various far-right movements are the key actors driving this backsliding.

In particular, the 2024 Law on the Protection of Family Values and Protection of Minors imposes discriminatory restrictions on LGBTI+ persons and threatens their human rights. It introduces a prohibition for same-sex marriages or civil unions, following up on the 2018 amendments to the Constitution that explicitly define marriage as a “union between a man and a woman.”³⁷ Community members are banned from adopting or fostering children. It also includes broad prohibitions on “promoting” LGBTI+ issues at public assemblies and educational institutions, in literature, film, and media, and even in direct communication with children.³⁸ Additionally, the law bans legal gender recognition and criminalizes gender-affirming healthcare for transgender people. This contravenes a recent European Court of Human Rights judgment that held that Georgia establish mechanisms for legal gender recognition of transgender persons.³⁹ There are also vague provisions that seek to strip transgender employees from any anti-discrimination protections regarding gender recognition in their employment, including those imposed by private agreements. The law also helps fuel anti-LGBTI+ narratives by perpetuating harmful stereotypes by alluding to a threat posed to children by LGBTI+ people and by conflating consensual same-sex relationship with incest.⁴⁰ The day after the law was adopted, celebrity transgender woman Kesaria Abramidze was found brutally murdered in her home.⁴¹

Previously, the adoption of the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination⁴² in 2014 signaled important progress in fighting discrimination as it explicitly included sexual orientation and gender identity as protected

grounds. However, the lack of political will to prioritize LGBTI+ equality resulted in the law never being fully implemented or consistently enforced. Mentions of gender and LGBTI+ issues had already started disappearing from policy documents before the 2024 law, and the word “gender” was removed from all existing legislation in 2025.⁴³ Gender identity was also removed as a protected ground from the 2014 anti-discrimination law, leaving only sexual orientation.⁴⁴ Legislative changes affecting civil society, including the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence⁴⁵ and the Foreign Agents Registration Act⁴⁶ discussed below, have also significantly weakened LGBTI+ community organizing.⁴⁷

On the rare occasions that LGBTI+ groups have attempted to hold peaceful public assemblies, they have been met with violence and harassment by counter protesters. Reports suggest that these counter protesters often belong to radical Orthodox Christian groups and have been incited by statements from GOC clergy.⁴⁸ On 8 July 2023, thousands of far-right demonstrators, including clergy, stormed the site of the Tbilisi Pride Festival. It followed public threats against the event and calls by the GOC Patriarchate to ban so-called “LGBTQI+ propaganda.”⁴⁹ After GOC and governmental leaders called for the Tbilisi Pride march to be cancelled in July 2021, radical conservative groups attacked the offices of Tbilisi Pride and the Shame Movement. They also violently assaulted journalists, activists, and human rights defenders.⁵⁰ The *de facto* second-in-command in the GOC, Metropolitan Shio Mujiri, labelled Tbilisi Pride “part of a large campaign which aims to distance the nation from God, our traditions, church and degrade it.”⁵¹ The Council of Europe’s European Commission against Racism and Intolerance raised concerns about GOC clergy comments surrounding the 2021 Tbilisi Pride, believing that they could be seen “as an incitement to violence against participants of the Pride events.”⁵² In 2012 and 2013, at peaceful assemblies during the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (IDAHOTB), LGBTI+ people were violently attacked by religious counter-demonstrators, including several Orthodox priests. To this day, there has been no effective investigation into the events of 2012, 2013, 2021, and 2023, and the perpetrators of the violence have not been held accountable. Amnesty International has asserted that the absence of justice reinforces “a dangerous trend of impunity in the name of religion.”⁵³

These incidents are emblematic of wider political and societal hostility towards the LGBTI+ community. Ultranationalist and far-right groups harass and assault LGBTI+ people, while political and religious leaders spread anti-LGBTI messages, contributing to a rise in political homophobia.⁵⁴ For instance, *de facto* leader of the Georgian Dream party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, framed “LGBT propaganda” as a threat to the nation’s survival in 2024: “anti-Christian forces are trying to erase the identity of nations, states, and people. Their goal is to turn a person into a being devoid of dignity and morality, who will not have any national, religious, or personal identity; one should not even know for sure whether one is a man or a woman.”

As one of the most trusted institutions in Georgia, the GOC's stance on LGBTI+ issues significantly shapes public opinion and fuels ultra-right movements that, in collaboration with GOC officials, frame LGBTI+ equality as a threat to Georgian identity, culture, and national values. These attitudes are reflected in wider society: A 2020 UN Development Programme study found that over half of women and 8 in 10 men would never have a homosexual friend, and even more would be ashamed if they had a gay child and believe that gay people should not be allowed to work with children.⁵⁵ In a 2018 study, over 80% of LGBTI+ persons reported having experienced some form of abuse by family members.⁵⁶

Hate speech and hate crime are widespread but vastly underreported, both because hate crimes are improperly qualified and because victims are unwilling to refer incidents to the police due to stigma and fear of their response. There is a general sense of impunity for hate speech in Georgia, and the legislative framework fails to explicitly prohibit hatred based on sexual orientation or gender identity.⁵⁷

Women's rights and gender equality

Social attitudes towards women's rights and gender equality reveal persistent patriarchal worldviews. A nationwide study conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center found that most respondents believed that women should accept lower pay and devote more time to their families than men. Additionally, the majority of respondents believed that men should have the final say in family decisions and that childcare is solely the mother's responsibility. While few respondents believed that there are acceptable circumstances to hit a spouse, every fourth person considered that violence between a husband and wife is a private matter.⁵⁸

These social attitudes are reflected in the realities of sexual and gender-based violence and the lack of adequate state responses. Femicides continue to be a problem in Georgia with dozens of cases reported each year. According to the Prosecutor's Office, 186 women were killed between 2016 and 2022.⁵⁹ Georgian criminal law regarding sexual violence does not align with international human rights law, including the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention. In particular, the provisions on rape and related offenses are not based on the absence of free and voluntary consent but rather require proof of physical force, threats, or the victim's helpless condition.⁶⁰ Domestic violence legislation also fails to cover violence by non-cohabitating intimate partners.

As part of a broader push towards anti-equality policies, gender-related terminology and gender equality principles were removed from over a dozen laws in April 2025.⁶¹ The coordinating mechanism on equality issues envisaged in the 2014 Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination has never been established.⁶² Existing mechanisms, such as the parliament's Council for Gender Equality and the government's Commission on Gender

Equality and Domestic Violence, were abolished or suspended in 2024.⁶³

In Georgia, pregnant women face several barriers to accessing safe and legal abortions, including mandatory ultrasounds, long waiting periods, and dissuasive counseling. In 2023, Georgia further restricted access through a ministerial decree meant to dissuade abortions, including a requirement to include a psychologist and social worker during mandatory counseling.⁶⁴ Out of the 49 European countries and territories assessed in the 2025 European Abortion Policies Atlas, Georgia ranks 41st with a score of 40.6%, which is a substantial decrease from its 58% Atlas score in 2021.⁶⁵

Treatment of religious minorities

Muslims in certain regions face high degrees of hostility, discrimination, and violence. In the Adigeni municipality, Muslim worshippers who had gathered for prayer were repeatedly attacked and harassed in 2023–2024 by large groups of local residents led by local GOC clergy. No investigations were initiated by the local authorities and state officials pressured the local Muslim community to stop religious activities – which the local mufti agreed to on 10 April 2024.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the Muslim community in Batumi has been unable to construct a new mosque, forcing them to pray outside. The discriminatory refusal to grant a permit by Batumi City Hall was challenged by the Muslim community in 2017. It was overturned by the city court in 2019 and the court of appeal in 2021. However, a 2023 Supreme Court decision sent the case back to the court of appeal for reconsideration, where the case still remains unresolved.⁶⁷

According to reports, there is a pattern of state authorities restricting the ability of religious minority communities to build new houses of worship by refusing to issue construction permits. Allegedly, local authorities are often taking into account the opinion of GOC clergy who disagree with the construction. At other times, state authorities have set extra-legal requirements for construction that hinders applicants from obtaining permits.⁶⁸

A 2021 leak revealed that the State Security Service illegally wiretapped and surveilled representatives of religious organizations. However, no charges have since been filed with the Prosecutor Office and the investigation into the matter has been considered ineffective.⁶⁹

Freedom of expression and advocacy of humanist rights

Standing up for humanist values, including human rights and democracy, has become increasingly difficult in Georgia. A range of legislative changes restrict freedom of expression, threaten civil society funding, challenge media independence, and criminalize peaceful protest. Meanwhile, mass protests following the 2024 election were met with police violence, torture, and imprisonment.

Freedom of association and civic space

Against a backdrop of intense public protests, the Georgian Dream governing party pushed through a number of laws in 2024 and 2025 that severely restrict the right to freedom of association and undermine civil society. The first notable law was the Law on Transparency in Foreign Influence, enacted in May 2024, which obliges non-profit organizations and media outlets that receive more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as “organizations serving the interests of a foreign power.”⁷⁰ Those organizations need to comply with far-reaching reporting and oversight requirements and must hand over, upon request, any information, including sensitive personal information. Failure to comply can be punished with administrative fines of up to GEL 25,000 (approx. USD 9,300).⁷¹ The law also affects non-GOC religious or belief organizations, since many of them are registered as non-profit legal entities, or operate affiliated charities, schools, or social-service organizations that are registered as non-profit entities.⁷² The Venice Commission found that the law violates international human rights law standards and creates a chilling effect for organizations by undermining their “financial stability and credibility.”⁷³

In March 2025, the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) was adopted, which imposes far more restrictive obligations and individual criminal responsibility for violations. The FARA applies to individuals and both commercial and non-commercial organizations that engage in a broad range of vaguely defined “political activities” while acting under the influence of a “foreign principal,” a term that includes foreign organizations, citizens, and states.⁷⁴ Anyone who falls within this broad definition must register as a “foreign agent,” submit detailed reports on their finances and activities to the authorities, share two copies of any public statement with the authorities within 48 hours, and label any disseminated material as made by a “foreign agent.”⁷⁵ Non-compliance with the law can lead to fines of up to GEL 10,000 (approx. USD 3,700) and prison sentences of up to five years.⁷⁶

Civil society groups also lament the stigmatizing impact that being labeled a “foreign agent” by these two laws has in the post-Soviet context. For instance, around the time of the adoption of the Transparency of Foreign Influence Law, NGOs were subjected to a disinformation and harassment campaign, including from politicians. Human rights defenders and activists received hundreds of threats, their offices and homes were vandalized with offensive inscriptions, and posters in several cities called specific activists and journalists “traitors” and “enemies.”⁷⁷ From late April to June 2024, this escalated into violence with unidentified assailants attacking dozens of activists, frequently leading to hospitalization.⁷⁸ Despite many attacks happening in public in front of witnesses and CCTV, no suspects have been identified or arrested.

The government also introduced amendments to the Law on Grants⁷⁹ in April 2025, which obliges organizations to get consent from the government to receive grants from abroad. This was expanded in June 2025 to include even technical assistance and knowledge sharing. As part of the approval process, the government reviews the grant for compatibility with government programs and strategy. Shortly after the new law was put in place, the British Embassy released a statement saying it had halted all grant-making.⁸⁰ Reception of a grant without approval can result in a fine on the recipient of twice the value of the grant. The ability of a civil society organization to solicit, receive and use funding is a fundamental part of the right to freedom of association.

Since the government introduced these legislative changes, state authorities have begun to prosecute prominent NGOs that had supported the 2024 protests. Starting in May 2025, the bank accounts of a dozen prominent NGOs have been frozen and staff members’ homes have been searched as part of an investigation into the alleged facilitation of group violence during the anti-government protests.⁸¹ At least eight leading CSOs received a court order requesting large amounts of documents in June 2025, including confidential information on survivors of human rights violations.⁸²

It should also be noted that Georgian Dream officials have reportedly said that they would seek to ban the main opposition party. They have already simplified the process of prohibiting political parties and, therefore, have made it easier to ban politicians from standing for elections. Additionally, there have been reports that they have begun investigating the opposition for alleged crimes.⁸³

Freedom of the press

Legislative changes passed in 2025 to broadcasting laws give the government editorial control and the ability to restrict funding. Changes to the Law on Broadcasting⁸⁴ explicitly prohibit the receipt of foreign funding and in-kind assistance by broadcasters. Other media outlets are affected by the consent requirement for foreign funding of the previously-mentioned Law on Grants as well as by the onerous and stigmatizing registration and reporting requirements of FARA and the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence.⁸⁵ The amended Law on Broadcasting also ended self-regulation and imposed new coverage standards, including vague notions of “fairness and impartiality,” which are said to allow for arbitrary interpretation and enable editorial control by the government.⁸⁶ A violation may escalate to the suspension or revocation of the broadcasting license. The Communications Commission that enforces the law has repeatedly been accused of selective enforcement against government-critical outlets and interference in their operations.⁸⁷ The parliament also adopted legislative amendments to ban journalists from filming in court houses and to restrict their ability to scrutinize parliamentarians in 2025 and 2023 respectively.⁸⁸

The ruling Georgian Dream party has already filed lawsuits against three opposition-aligned TV channels under the new law, and one channel has shut since.⁸⁹ The anti-corruption bureau opened investigations into at least six outlets. Meanwhile, the government's control over the Georgian Public Broadcaster has increased to such an extent – including through the dismissal of critical journalists – that, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), it “has become a mouthpiece for the ruling party.”⁹⁰

The number of direct attacks on the press has also significantly increased. Between October 2024 and October 2025, RSF documented 600 attacks, including 127 violent assaults, by the authorities.⁹¹ Another Georgian NGO counted 108 violations of press rights between November 2024 and February 2025.⁹² The violence against media representatives is also fueled by incendiary statements from Georgian Dream politicians and impunity for attacks committed against journalists.⁹³ Often using recently ratcheted and expanded offenses criminalizing a wide range of protest-related conduct, police are increasingly treating journalists as protesters and prosecuting them to obstruct coverage. Most prominently, Georgian journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli, founder of two independent media outlets, was recently sentenced to two years in prison for the crime of “attacking a police officer” – a sentence that human rights groups consider to be a politically motivated charge.⁹⁴

Freedom of expression

A range of recent legislative amendments have made it easier to convict people – often for speech critical of government politicians. Although Georgia abolished criminal defamation in 2004, changes related to civil liability for defamation have eroded protections for the media and individuals facing lawsuits.⁹⁵ Specifically, the recent legislative amendments have eliminated safeguards in favor of free speech, removed the damage requirement and public interest exception, reversed the burden of proof regarding whether a statement contains false facts, and eliminated protections for journalistic sources.⁹⁶

In February 2025, a new offense of “insulting public officials, state and public servants” was introduced. The provision references “verbal abuse, swearing, persistent insults, and/or other offensive actions” without further definition. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) criticized the provision for being excessively broad, subjective, and liable for arbitrary interpretation.⁹⁷ Offenses can be punishable with a fine of up to GEL 5,000 (approx. USD 1,800) or 60 days imprisonment. It should be noted that this offense also punishes insults directed at the leadership of legal entities under public law, which includes religious organizations and the GOC.

The onerous and stigmatizing registration and reporting requirements of FARA and the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence has a chilling effect on civil society. In addition, the aforementioned Law on the Protection of Family Values and Protection of Minors⁹⁸ heavily restricts freedom of expression by effectively banning any public speech that could be deemed to “promote” LGBTI+ issues. Meanwhile, 2024 amendments to the Law on Public Service⁹⁹ make it easier to dismiss civil servants for being critical of the government and large-scale dismissals have already taken place.¹⁰⁰

Attempts to introduce a “blasphemy” law

In recent years, there have been several unsuccessful attempts to introduce a “blasphemy” law in Georgia, including in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2024. In 2015, a draft law, advanced by the GOC, sought to penalize “insulting religious feelings” with the intent of protecting the GOC and its clergy from criticism. The draft proposed to introduce fines of up to GEL 600 (approx. USD 220) for repeat offenses.¹⁰¹ In 2018, MP Emzar Kvitsiani submitted a bill that would make “public manifestations of hatred” against religious symbols, organizations, clergy, and, believers – as well as the publication of materials with “the aim of offending religious feelings” – a criminal offense with imprisonment of up to one year.¹⁰² In January 2024, the Georgian Dream chairperson of the Legal Committee, Henri Okhanashvili, announced his intention to introduce legislation criminalizing the desecration of religious buildings and objects, which raised civil society concerns about the potentially vague and subjective nature of any offense.¹⁰³

Freedom of assembly and crackdowns on protests

The crackdowns on public demonstrations in recent years, particularly during the post-2024 election protests, have been marked by violence and arrests. Police regularly used excessive force – including arbitrarily firing crowd control weapons, group beatings, and the alleged use of torture – against protesters and journalists.¹⁰⁴ Particularly in the context of the 2024 protest, informal groups that are affiliated with the Georgian Dream government (“Titushkas”) have regularly intimidated and assaulted journalists, activists, and protesters – often in coordination with police and without facing legal consequences. Instead, police have arrested hundreds of largely-peaceful protesters on spurious charges and courts have imposed fines and prison sentences after perfunctory trials. As of February 2025, more than 60 protesters faced criminal charges.¹⁰⁵

In February 2025, the parliament adopted a range of amendments to mete out harsher punishments for a swath of protest-related offenses while creating several new offenses. Next to amplifying fines and quadrupling the maximum detention period for administrative offenses from 15 to 60 days, jail sentences have been introduced for many offenses. Wearing a face mask, blocking a road intentionally, or possessing fireworks during a protest will result in a 15-day administrative detention for a first offense and jail time of up to two years for repeated offenses.¹⁰⁶ OSCE-ODIHR raised serious concerns about the amendments' compliance with international human rights law and characterized the penalties as "disproportionate" and creating a "chilling effect."¹⁰⁷

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Kenya

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression
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The Republic of Kenya is situated on the equator and on Africa's east coast with the Great Rift Valley running through the country. After the Mau Mau insurgency of the 1950s, Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963.¹ The population of approximately 58 million² is largely Christian (85.5%), with a large Muslim minority (10.9%). Other religious minorities make up the remainder of the population.

According to the National Population Census of 2019 released by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics

(KNBS), 755,000 people identified as atheist or having no religion.³ The country is ethnically diverse, but issues linked to ethnicity have historically been a source of political conflict.

Kenya is a member of the East African Community (EAC) and home to more than 629,000 refugees, the majority of whom come from neighboring Somalia and South Sudan.⁴

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
	Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative	The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination	'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto 'blasphemy' laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence
Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions		There is significant social marginalization of the non-religious or stigma associated with expressing atheism, humanism or secularism	Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is somewhat restricted
Official symbolic deference to religion		Religious courts or tribunals rule directly on some family or 'moral' matters; it is legally an opt-in system, but the possibility of social coercion is very clear	Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious

Constitution and government

In 2010, Kenya adopted a new Constitution⁵ that declares that there is no state religion and the state shall be religiously neutral. The Constitution protects the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of the media, freedom of association and assembly, and freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion. Key provisions of the Constitution include:

The Right to Freedom of Religion (Article 32): In Article 32, it is declared that every person has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, and opinion. This includes the right to manifest any religion or belief through worship, practice, teaching, or observance, either individually or in community with others.

Non-Discrimination (Article 27): The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion in Article 27, ensuring that individuals cannot be denied access to institutions, employment, or facilities due to their beliefs. No State Religion (Article 8): There is no state religion in Kenya as outlined in Article 8, which further supports the pluralistic nature of the society.

Although Kenya's Constitution declares there is no state religion, its Preamble refers to the "supremacy of the Almighty God." It also establishes Kadhi's Courts with jurisdiction over limited matters of Islamic personal law, and requires that Kadhi's Court officials be persons who profess the Muslim faith.

President William Ruto, who was sworn in as Kenya's new President in 2022, is widely considered to be the country's first evangelical Christian President. Since his appointment in 2022, there has been growing concern that the secular nature of the Kenyan state is at risk.⁶ During his 2022 election campaign, President Ruto signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with evangelical churches agreeing "to protect the church." The MoU included government funding for pastors, allocation of land to churches, the appointment of clergy to government roles, and the lifting of a moratorium on the registration of new churches – which had formerly been put in place to curb growing radicalization and commercialization.⁷

President Ruto and the First Lady are reported to have a chapel in one of their suburban homes. First lady, Rachel Ruto, has publicly declared that she will work with religious groups to protect "family values" and lead national prayers against homosexuality. She has also created a "Faith Diplomacy Office" to spread a "praying culture" across the country.⁸

Registration of religious groups

Kenya's Societies Act (1968)⁹ requires religious groups, institutions or places of worship, and faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are constituted as "societies", to apply for registration or exemption with the Registrar of Societies – a department under the Office of the Attorney General. Unregistered societies are considered unlawful and are not permitted to operate. However, in practice this is often inconsistently enforced. Indigenous and traditional religious groups are not required to register.

Leaders of new religious groups are required to hold a diploma or degree from a recognized religious institution as well as a sworn affidavit that shows whether they are registered members or officers of other religious societies. The obligation has been criticized by the Hindu Council of Kenya on the basis that the Hindu faith does not recognize, or require, any specific religious certification for Hindu priests.¹⁰

Registered religious institutions and places of worship are not required to pay tax on tithes, offerings, and donations as they are not considered as income under the Income Tax Act of 1974.¹¹ Non-governmental organizations are also required to register with the NGO Coordination Board.¹²

Registration of non-religious groups

In 2016, Humanists International's member organization – the Atheists in Kenya Society (AIK) – became the first non-religious society to be registered under the Societies Act after initially being rejected.¹³ However, only two months later, the group's registration was suspended after complaints from religious groups.¹⁴ The organization's founder and President, Harrison Mumia, challenged the suspension at the High Court, succeeding in the reinstatement of the society's status in 2018.¹⁵ According to the Judge's ruling, non-religious beliefs are offered equal protection under the law:

"In my view, it is a matter of conscience for any person to decide whether to believe in anything or be religious for if it was not the case, it will translate into people being compelled to believe in or practice what is actually against their conscience. The right of atheist (sic) should thus be protected under Article 32 [...] it would be unconstitutional to impose a belief in any person if that person does not endorse as this amounts to theocratic tyranny which our constitution does [not] support as is made clear in Article 8 which provides that "there shall be no state religion" and Article 32 (4) which states that "A person shall not be compelled to act, or engage in any act, that is contrary to the person's believe (sic) or religion."¹⁶

In 2022, former Member of Parliament (MP) Bishop Stephen Ndichu, a known Christian fundamentalist, petitioned the High Court in another attempt to revoke the organization's registration.¹⁷ The Bishop claimed that the registration, and continued operation of the organization, violated the Kenyan Constitution which acknowledges "the supremacy of the Almighty God of all Creation". The petition was dismissed by the High Court in 2024. The judge opined that holding non-theistic or atheistic views is protected under Articles 8 and 32(4) of the Constitution, and that the petition was therefore without merit.¹⁸

The petition challenging the registration of AIK came following their public criticism of religious activity in government. In June 2022, AIK expressed concern about the Chief Justice's participation in the National Prayer Breakfast and, shortly after President William Ruto's inauguration in September 2022, AIK issued a statement condemning First Lady Rachel Ruto's hosting of religious leaders at State House – the official residence of the President.¹⁹

Shakahola Forest Massacre

In 2023, 429 bodies were discovered in mass graves in Shakahola forest, Malindi. The deaths were discovered to be part of a religious cult led by self-proclaimed Pastor, Paul Mackenzie, who encouraged his followers to prepare for the end of the world by starving themselves and their children. Most of the bodies showed signs of both starvation and assault. In 2024, Mackenzie and 29 of his associates were charged with the murder of 191 children. Mackenzie also faces multiple counts of manslaughter and charges of child abuse and terrorism.²⁰ At the time of writing, nine further bodies have been discovered in fresh graves, raising fears that the cult may still be active.²¹

In response to what has been described as “one of the worst ever cases of cult-related mass deaths”,²² the President and senior leaders apologized to Kenyans for the slow response and promised to regulate religious sects.²³ However, the discovery of two bodies in the compound of another religious sect in Migori County, in May 2025, has again raised the question of the regulation of religious groups.²⁴ In 2024, a Religious Organizations Bill seeking greater regulation of religious institutions was put before the Senate and opened to public consultation towards the end of 2025.²⁵

Human rights abuses in the name of counter-terrorism

In response to a spate of terrorist attacks in the country over the last two decades, Kenya has implemented large-scale counter-terrorism operations. The United Nations Committee against Torture and human rights groups have consistently raised concerns about allegations of human rights abuses perpetrated by state officials in the context of counter-terrorism operations. These include allegations of extrajudicial killings, torture, gender-based violence, enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, extortion and forcible relocation.²⁶ These human rights abuses are reported to disproportionately affect Muslims, particularly the Somali community.²⁷ The United Nations (UN) has repeatedly called on Kenya to ensure that measures taken to combat terrorism are proportionate, strictly necessary, and conform with the UN Convention against Torture. They have also requested that Kenya review its definition of terrorism in the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012) to ensure that it is in line with international standards.²⁸

Education and children’s rights

In both public and private schools in Kenya, non-religious students – or students from other faiths – must undertake compulsory religious education as part of the curriculum. Religious education typically reflects the local faith of the community or the organization that sponsors the school, and is most commonly either Christian, Islamic or Hindu.²⁹

The Atheists in Kenya Society (AIK) continues to call for the abolishment of religious education in schools and, in 2023, recommended to a government task force on education reforms that religious education be replaced with philosophy and ethics courses.³⁰

Olympic High School case

In a case regarded as a test of religious freedom in the country, a girl was sent home by Olympic High School, Nairobi, due to her dreadlocks. Her father went to court on 14 January 2019, suing the school for sending his daughter home for refusing to cut her dreadlocks. His lawyer, Wambua Shadrack, said the action amounted to discrimination on the basis of Rastafarian beliefs. Justice Chacha Mwita ruled that Rastafarianism is a religion, whose practices, including the growing of dreadlocks, shouldn’t be discriminated against in public institutions. “The fact that she keeps rastas should not have been the basis to chase her from school,” the judge said, reiterating that “School rules should never be applied in a manner that infringes on the students’ Constitutional rights”.³¹

Child marriage

Despite Kenya’s strong legal framework to address child marriage, the issue continues to affect girls from marginalized communities where effective enforcement has been challenging.³² In Turkana county, for example, the UN reports that one in four girls are married before they are 18 years old.³³ The impact of drought and food shortages has also increased the economic pressure on families – many of whom are reported to be “marrying off girls to secure dowries to help support the rest of the family”.³⁴

Family, community and society

During Kenya’s 2025 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the UN Human Rights Committee raised concerns that there continues to be no comprehensive and effective anti-discrimination framework consistent with its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These concerns extend to discrimination linked to sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, religion or belief, disability, albinism, socio-economic status, HIV status, and ethnic or political affiliation, among others. Similar concerns about the absence of an effective anti-discrimination law were raised in Kenya’s 2020 and 2015 UPR cycles.³⁵

Religious courts

Under Article 45(4)(b) of the Kenyan Constitution, parliament is required to enact legislation recognizing a system of personal and family law adhered to by persons professing a particular religion. The Constitution allows Kadhi’s courts – courts that apply Sharia law – to be used where all parties concerned describe themselves as Muslims and agree to submit themselves to the

jurisdiction of the court. These courts are permitted to make rulings on matters relating to personal status, marriage, divorce and inheritance. However, there is no clear mechanism to ensure that vulnerable individuals from Muslim communities – who may not identify as Muslim – are not socially coerced into submitting to these courts.

The country's secular High Court has jurisdiction over civil or criminal proceedings, including those in the Kadhi's courts, and accepts appeals of any Kadhi's court decision. In 2023, the Court of Appeal ruled in favor of the rights of the child over Sharia law in an inheritance dispute. It was argued that, under Sharia law principles, a child born outside of marriage may only receive inheritance from the mother. However, the court ruled that the child was entitled to inherit from his late father's estate.³⁶ The Supreme Court upheld the decision in 2025, declaring that,

"In our view, denying children born out of wedlock by the same parents the same benefits accorded to children born within wedlock, on the basis of the alleged "sins" of their parents, is unreasonable and unjustifiable"³⁷

Women's rights

Gender inequality persists in Kenyan society and discriminatory stereotypes about the roles of women and men are prevalent.³⁸ Violence against women and girls is common and, according to a 2024 report by Human Rights Watch, approximately 13 women and girls are murdered, and 130 cases of sexual violence, are reported weekly.³⁹ The 2015 Protection Against Domestic Violence Act⁴⁰ is poorly enforced and marital rape has yet to be criminalized.⁴¹ In 2024, two high profile killings sparked marches across the country calling for stronger action from the government against gender-based violence.⁴²

Sexual & reproductive health

Women in Kenya face barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health care. According to a number of youth rights groups in Kenya, the National Reproductive Health Policy 2022-2023,⁴³ imposes parental consent for young women and girls under 21 to access reproductive health care and information with the result that the majority are effectively excluded from receiving these services.⁴⁴

According to the Kenya Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society, an estimated 2,600 women die from unsafe abortions every year.⁴⁵ Although Kenya's 2010 Constitution recognizes the right to abortion in cases where the life or health of the mother is in danger, the Penal Code⁴⁶ still continues to criminalize abortion in all circumstances. This unclear and restrictive legal framework leads many women to seek unsafe and illegal abortions. In recent years, two High Court rulings have affirmed that abortion is indeed a right under the Constitution.⁴⁷

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Although the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act⁴⁸ came into force in 2011, implementation has been challenging. A number of ethnic groups continue the practice and it is estimated that 15% of women and girls in the country have been subjected to FGM.⁴⁹ The UN Committee Against Torture has called on the Kenyan Government to take stronger measures to eradicate the practice, including increased awareness-raising among religious and traditional leaders.⁵⁰

Witchcraft accusations

An escalating pattern of killings and attacks on elderly people, particularly women, have been documented in recent years. Claims of witchcraft are frequently used as an excuse for the attacks, often in a bid to claim land from victims. Colonial injustices in the form of land seizures have never been rectified by subsequent governments, which has fuelled ongoing land disputes exacerbated by rising unemployment and economic crises. According to the human rights group Haki Yetu, more than 250 murders were committed between 2020-2022 across Kenya's coastal counties. Similar figures have been reported in parts of Western Kenya.⁵¹

A Colonial-era witchcraft law – the Witchcraft Act of 1925⁵² – remains in place and enables perpetrators to legally defend their actions. Additionally, patriarchal attitudes that girls and women should neither inherit nor own land or other property persist. A lack of understanding of age-related conditions – such as dementia – also contributes to the phenomenon. Given the widespread belief in witchcraft in many communities, perpetrators are rarely prosecuted when witchcraft is given as a reason for murder.⁵³

LGBTI+ rights

According to Freedom House, there are significant implicit barriers facing non-Christian and LGBTI+ individuals that wish to participate in national politics.⁵⁴

Under Articles 162, 163 and 165 of the British Colonial era Penal Code, "carnal knowledge.....against the order of nature" is criminalized with a maximum penalty of 14 years imprisonment. Five years imprisonment is the maximum penalty for "acts of gross indecency" between males. Although these laws are rarely applied, the LGBTI+ community faces ongoing discrimination, abuse, and violent attacks. There have been several high-profile murder cases of LGBTI+ individuals in recent years.⁵⁵

In 2023, the Supreme Court ruled that LGBTI+ groups had the right to register as NGOs. The ruling was met with protests and threats to the LGBTI+ community.⁵⁶ An MP from the United Democratic Alliance Party, Mohammed Ali, cited the Quran and a Biblical passage claiming that they called for the death penalty for homosexual acts.⁵⁷

Prior to the ruling, a Family Protection Bill had been tabled by opposition MP Peter Kaluma seeking to outlaw same-sex relationships and any kind of LGBTI+ activity or advocacy. This included the production, marketing, advertising, publishing, printing, broadcasting, and distribution of any content – including of an artistic nature – which “promoted” or “encouraged” homosexuality.⁵⁸ The bill specifically aims to “promote marriage between man and woman and to proscribe homosexuality, same sex unions and relationships.” It also declares that “No group, society, association, club or organization bearing the name “homosexual”, “lesbian”, “gay”, “bisexual”, “transgender”, “queer”, ‘questioning’, whether in full or abbreviated, shall be registered in Kenya.”⁵⁹ At the time of writing, the Family Protection Bill remains a legislative proposal awaiting scrutiny and has not yet been passed into law.

Reports indicate that since 2023, there has been a rise in anti-LGBTI+ disinformation, leading to self-censorship within the LGBTI+ community.⁶⁰ There has also been a reported rise in conversion therapy practices used by both Christian and Muslim religious leaders and within religious settings.⁶¹ The UN Human Rights Committee has expressed concern about incidents of children being expelled from school on the basis of actual or suspected sexual orientation and/or gender identity.⁶² According to CIVICUS, a generational divide has emerged on these issues:

“Deeply rooted cultural and religious beliefs continue to dominate national debates, with conservative voices strongly resisting change. A clear generational divide has emerged: while younger Kenyans generally side with progress, traditional groups within political and religious institutions typically work to maintain the status quo.”⁶³

The experience of the non-religious

According to the Atheists in Kenya Society (AIK), the first challenge facing the non-religious in Kenya is to be allowed to exist openly in a highly religious society. Many of their members struggle to maintain relationships and are fearful of repercussions at work. They experience online harassment and cite cases of companies firing employees for being atheists.⁶⁴

“You can’t come out as an atheist without being considered a devil worshipper, so for many people [AIK] meetings are the only place they can be open.” (see Testimonies Section)⁶⁵

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Freedom of expression, freedom of the media, and freedom of assembly and association are enshrined in the Kenyan Constitution. However, respect for these rights is varied and often restricted on the pretext of tackling insecurity. In the case of freedom of expression specifically, an array of laws carrying criminal sanctions are used to silence journalists, limit online expression and restrict criticism of the government.⁶⁶ The Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act 2018⁶⁷ has been used to target bloggers and internet shutdowns and restrictions on digital platforms have become a growing concern.⁶⁸

Media freedom

Kenya boasts one of the most vibrant media landscapes in Africa and journalists have actively worked to expose government corruption and wrongdoing. However, several laws restrict press freedom. Amendments to the Kenyan Information and Communications Act in 2013 introduced strong controls on radio and television broadcasts.⁶⁹ There is a high rate of impunity for the harassment of journalists by government and security forces with such incidents rarely investigated by the police. Some journalists are reported to self-censor due to the combination of restrictive press laws and the potential for intimidation and violence. This is particularly the case for women journalists.⁷⁰

Media coverage of public protests exposes journalists to risks of reprisals. Dozens of media personnel were injured while covering protests against a finance bill in 2024 and several journalists were attacked or arrested. Media outlets, including KTN News, said that the authorities had threatened to shut down the station in response to their reporting of the protests.⁷¹ Human Rights Watch found that media organizations had ceased their live coverage of the protests after their editors had received threats from the authorities.⁷²

"Blasphemy" Laws

Kenya criminalizes “blasphemy” under Chapter 14 of the Penal Code. Specifically, Article 134 focuses on “Insult to religion” and refers to destroying, damaging or defiling a place of worship or a sacred object with intent/knowledge that it would insult a religion. Article 138, entitled “Writing or uttering words with intent to wound religious feelings” criminalizes words, sounds, gestures, or objects made with deliberate intent to wound another person’s religious feelings. Article 134 may result in a fine or up to two years imprisonment while Article 138 carries a prison sentence of up to one year.⁷³

Freedom of Assembly

Kenya's Constitution protects the right to freedom of assembly, yet the Public Order Act⁷⁴ requires organizers of public meetings and demonstrations to notify the police in advance – a requirement that is often reported to be used in practice to block or disperse peaceful assemblies. Freedom House reports that, although security forces showed some restraint during the 2022 electoral period, during opposition-led demonstrations in 2023, an estimated 30 people were killed and more than 300 were arrested. The UN has also raised concerns about the policing of demonstrations, including allegations of abductions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, and excessive force.⁷⁵

In 2024, Amnesty International reported that thousands of people took part in demonstrations opposing a proposed Finance Bill and corruption. Police responses to the protests prompted serious allegations of abuses, including excessive force, deaths and injuries, arbitrary detention, and enforced disappearances. The government reportedly approved military support for police operations during the unrest, even though the Constitution limits such deployment to emergencies and requires parliamentary approval.⁷⁶

Freedom House reported that dozens of people were killed and hundreds more were injured throughout the duration of the protests, which lasted for more than seven weeks. In addition, over 80 demonstrators and government critics were reportedly abducted and detained without due process.⁷⁷

In 2024, Kenya's National Assembly considered the Assembly and Demonstration Bill,⁷⁸ a proposal to regulate demonstrations. The Bill would require protest organizers to give advance notice of at least three days (and no more than fourteen days), including the location, route and time. It empowers a "regulating officer" to stop or prevent protests on the basis of "a breach of the peace or public order." It also links participation in demonstrations considered unlawful to criminal liability under the Penal Code, with penalties including up to one year's imprisonment.

Freedom of Association

Kenya has a large and active civil society sector. However, NGOs have periodically faced regulatory pressure and targeting, including deregistration threats for alleged non-compliance with financial reporting and governance requirements. Kenya's NGO regulator has previously moved to deregister hundreds of organizations for alleged financial or reporting violations – steps that have been contested in court and criticized by civil society groups and observers as politically motivated efforts to constrain NGO activity.⁷⁹

During the 2024 protests over a proposed Finance Bill, President Ruto publicly alleged that the US-based Ford Foundation had financed the demonstrations and linked the organization to the unrest. The Ford Foundation denied funding or sponsoring the protests and reaffirmed that its grant-making is strictly non-partisan and well-documented. Commentators described the accusation as an attempt to discredit protest organizers and civil society groups.⁸⁰

Testimonies

"I don't know what my family has a harder time accepting, my atheism or my orientation. I came out as an atheist when I was 17 and when I told them I was gay later on, they concluded that I'm gay because I don't believe in god.

It's been really hard being a gay atheist because I'm an assertive person who doesn't run away from debate. I've lost many friends and been blocked and deleted on Facebook. I've been betrayed by family (a relative complained to my father and demanded I be reprimanded for my orientation). I've been drugged and raped because I came out to someone I thought was my friend, but I felt like no one was going to believe me so I never spoke about it after it happened, I just never spoke to my attacker again. I've been ignored by family members who I used to be really close to because they know I'm a gay atheist.

... I'm still forced to go to church when my mother wants me to which is very uncomfortable because she truly believes that if she forces me to go to church, I'll go back to being a "straight Christian".

... My sexuality and religious views are not the problem, it's the religious intolerance and homophobia that has the problem. Changing their perception of me is not easy because they've been brainwashed, so I stopped trying. ... The thing with homophobia and religious people is that they hate what makes them feel uncomfortable and victimise whoever's different. But I'll never stop voicing my opinions because I am a person with rights and I hope to be respected more one day."

— Dorothy

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Lebanon

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression
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Lebanon sits on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and is bordered by Israel to the south and Syria to the north and east. Its location has placed it at the center of Middle Eastern conflicts.¹

The country has a population of 5.8 million people.² It is host to the largest number of refugees per capita and per square kilometer in the world – including 1.5 million Syrians³ and at least 500,000 Palestinians.⁴

The country’s history has been marked by sectarian tensions between its numerous and diverse ethnic and religious groups which came to a head in the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990).

Over the last decade, Lebanon has faced a series of crippling crises. In 2015 a garbage crisis resulted in 20,000 tons of decomposing solid waste piled up in the streets of Beirut for eight months. The 2019 economic collapse plunged 80% of the population into poverty as

the Lebanese pound lost 98% of its value.⁵ In 2020, the Beirut port explosion – which is considered the third largest explosion in modern times – caused the death of 220 individuals, displaced 300,000 people, and led to 4.6 billion US dollars in damages.⁶ In 2023, a conflict between Israel and Hezbollah erupted on Lebanon’s southern border. It sharply escalated in 2024 triggering the internal displacement of almost nearly 900,000 people.⁷

The estimated religious breakdown of the Lebanese population, excluding the refugee population, is 32.2% Shia, 31.2% Sunni, 30.5% Christian, 5.5% Druze, and 0.6% Alawites and Ismailis combined. Jews, Baha’is, Buddhists, and Hindus are also present in small numbers.⁸ There are no reliable estimates of the number of atheists or non-religious people.

Lebanon is a member of the League of Arab States (LAS), as well as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<p>The non-religious are barred from some government offices (including posts reserved for particular religions or sects)</p> <p>State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities</p>	<p>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</p>	<p>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</p> <p>The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination</p> <p>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</p>	<p>‘Blasphemy’ is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto ‘blasphemy’ laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>

<p>There is systematic religious privilege</p> <p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p> <p>Legal or constitutional provisions exclude non-religious views from freedom of belief</p> <p>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</p>		<p>There is significant social marginalization of the non-religious or stigma associated with expressing atheism, humanism or secularism</p> <p>Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis</p> <p>Religious groups control some public or social services</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is somewhat restricted</p> <p>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</p>
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Constitution and government

In 2013, Robert Fisk, the late Middle East correspondent of The Independent, wrote the following to describe Lebanon:

“It may have beautiful mountains, fine food, an extraordinarily well-educated population, but it is sectarian. It’s a bit like owning a Rolls Royce complete with fresh leather seats, a flat screen television and a cocktail bar – but with square wheels. It doesn’t work.”⁹

Lebanon’s Constitution¹⁰ – alongside other laws and policies – guarantee the right to freedom of conscience, religion or belief. However, the entire system of government is based on sectarian quotas which, in practice, encourages religious discrimination and is inherently discriminatory against both the non-religious and against individuals of unrecognized religious groups. Sectarian division is codified in the Constitution and discourages individuals from leaving their familial assigned religion. Most non-religious people are expected to conform to a religious identity. Religious affiliation has become a de facto requirement for political participation and is often the only pathway to access basic services.

Lebanon officially recognizes 18 religious groups, including Ismailis, Alawites, Druzes and Jews. The government does not officially recognize religious groups

such as Baha’is, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant groups. Members of these groups cannot hold certain government positions, perform legally recognized marriage or divorce proceedings, and have no standing to determine inheritance issues. However, they are permitted to own property, assemble for worship and perform their religious rites freely.

State recognition can give a religious community’s ceremonies legal standing and may bring privileges such as tax-exempt status. It can also allow certain personal-status matters – such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance – to be handled under that community’s religious rules.¹¹

An individual is allowed to change religion if the change is approved by the religious group the person wishes to join. The government permits the publication of religious materials of every religious group in different languages and there are no legal prohibitions to proselytizing.

Lebanese law places the confirmation of top Sunni, Shia, and Druze religious appointments under the Council of Ministers, and the state provides compensation for those positions. Christian church leaders, however, are not state-confirmed and are not paid by the government.¹² All governmental and parliamentary seats are exclusively divided according to this religious and sectarian system, and citizens who do not belong to a religious group are effectively excluded from political representation, or indeed from holding any high public office.

Since its inception in 1920, Lebanon has been mired by sectarian strife and distrust, with the demographic size of each sect determining their share of power.¹³ Given the political sensitivity of sectarian demographics, there has been only one official census ever conducted by the Lebanese state, which took place in 1932, and which aimed to inform sectarian quotas. An agreement of sectarian quotas was agreed upon in the 1943 National Pact, and this was revised in the 1989 Taef Agreement¹⁴ which ended the 15 year long civil war.

As such, Lebanon follows a sectarian governance model, in which each sectarian group has a pre-defined quota in parliament, government, and public administration. For example, the President must be Christian Maronite, the Prime Minister must be Muslim Sunni, and the Speaker of the Parliament must be Muslim Shia. Half of the governmental and parliamentary seats are designated to Muslim sects and the other half to Christian sects. Additional sectarian quotas are followed to divide those seats among the 18 officially recognized sects, each categorized under the Muslim or Christian banner.

This rigid sectarian model in Lebanon makes it difficult for the Lebanese state to adapt to demographic changes. According to Ali Khalife in *A Nation Without Citizens*, such sectarian formulas effectively become a cause for new tensions, while simultaneously being unable to resolve those tensions they were created to address.¹⁵ Moreover, this model completely disregards non-religious individuals and denies them the right of political representation or the right to hold any public office.

Sectarianism and Clientelism

Not only are non-religious communities and other religious minorities excluded from politics, but many argue that the sectarian political elites are more motivated in serving their own interests rather than the interests of the communities they claim to represent. The political elites in Lebanon are mostly composed of former warlords from the Lebanese Civil War (1975 – 1990), who accepted peace terms in return for promises of a share of state resources.¹⁶ In the aftermath of the Taef Agreement which ended the war, these elites negotiated how to divide the spoils of the state.¹⁷ Not only did these former militia leaders employ their loyalists in the public sector at various points in the last three decades, but they also created distinct rent-seeking mechanisms for them.¹⁸ Thus, some argue that politics in Lebanon became akin to a game of capturing state resources, including money and jobs, and then dividing those resources on a loyalist sectarian basis.¹⁹

Studies show how Lebanon's political elites have created elaborate networks in which they offer services to their supporters, with services including access to healthcare, education, and employment.²⁰ Given the lack of adequate alternatives provided by the state, a large portion of the population rely on sectarian clientelist networks to

be able to fulfil these basic needs. For example, it is not uncommon for hospitals to refuse patients treatment because they cannot afford health care. This means that dependence on clientelist networks can literally be a matter of life and death.²¹ Political elites effectively provide a form of selective social welfare which guarantees loyalty from their supporters.

A study by university scholar Daniel Corstange examining the effect of clientelism on voter behavior in the 2009 parliamentary election of Lebanon found that a worryingly large proportion of voters were influenced by sectarian clientelist considerations when deciding how to vote. After accounting for social desirability bias, which leads voters to underreport taking bribes, the study concluded that around half of the population's voting behavior is affected by clientelism.²²

The sectarian political elites are closely allied with their respective religious institutions. As a result, the clerical class is in a strong position to influence public policy and block secular legislation.

How Sectarian Power-Sharing is used to Shield Corruption and Deepen Divisions

Lebanese politicians have at times invoked sectarian identity to deflect corruption allegations by reframing criticism. As public officials are appointed based on rigid sectarian quotas, accusations of wrongdoing are often presented as identity-driven attacks against the sectarian group the official represents. As a result, corrupt officials are rarely held accountable.

There has been very limited progress in achieving justice in two of the most prominent cases that have wreaked havoc on Lebanon in the last few years – the economic collapse and the Beirut port explosion. However, there are indications that sectarian divisions and the self-interest of political elites contributed to the crises.²³

Sectarian political tensions surrounding high-profile investigations in Lebanon have, at times, spilled into the streets and resulted in violence. On 14 October 2021, a protest by supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement calling for the removal of Judge Tarek Bitar – the lead investigator into the Beirut Port Explosion – escalated into armed clashes in Beirut. The violence left at least seven people dead and dozens injured, reviving widespread fears of a return to civil war-era violence.²⁴

Sectarian governance is considered a major factor that has contributed to state dysfunction and government paralysis.²⁵ Political vacuums at the level of the presidency and the executive have been recurring events in Lebanon since 2005. In the last two decades, there was a presidential vacuum for a period of five years and two months, and governmental immobilism for a period of nine years and four months.

In 2019, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement objected to the appointment of civil servants based on sectarian grounds – claiming that the intake did not reflect a Christian-Muslim balance. As the successful candidates were predominantly Muslim, the dispute further intensified public feelings of division within the country.²⁶ Existing sectarian political structures further entrench societal fragmentation and cement divisions rather than bridge differences.

These divisions were felt at a practical level in 2023 when the caretaker government, headed by the Muslim Prime Minister Najib Mikati, abruptly decided to suspend the transition to daylight saving time for one month. The decision is understood to have been motivated by a desire to appease the Muslim community who were soon to start Ramadan fasting traditions. The move would have allowed the Muslim community to break their fast at 6pm rather than 7pm. However, the decision was unpopular with Christians and other non-Muslim groups who did not accept the change. Subsequently, for a little over a week, the country was divided between so-called ‘Muslim time’ and ‘Christian time.’ Different media stations, businesses, airports, and educational institutions followed different time zones.²⁷

Education and children’s rights

Religious education is not a requirement in public schools, but it is permitted. However, in practice, many schools operate compulsory religious education classes, with no secular or civic alternative. Recognized religious groups are permitted to run their own private schools as long as they follow constitutional obligations to ensure they do not incite sectarian discord or threaten national security.²⁸ In public schools, religious authorities from the local community can enter schools to organize and teach religious education without the oversight of the Ministry of Education. Critics consider this practice to be detrimental as it may create division and competition between the interests of different religious groups.²⁹

The religious institution chosen to deliver classes is dependent on the religious affiliation of private schools, or the *de facto* demographic realities of where the public schools are located. In areas that are demographically mixed, it is common practice to divide students according to their religious identities into different sub-classes for the duration of the religious education class. Ali Khalife argues that religious authorities can preach and mobilize in schools, which has the potential to foster intolerance among students and undermine efforts to cultivate citizenship and democratic values.³⁰

History Education

Young people’s affiliation with their religious community is further entrenched by the way history is taught in Lebanese schools. Official school history books do not cover the period following the nation’s independence in 1943 as part of the curriculum. This is because political elites have never agreed on a common historical narrative of the civil war.³¹ The history curriculum has long been

contested, with scholars – often divided along sectarian lines – promoting competing narratives of Lebanon’s history.³² As such, the de-facto practice is that different versions of history are taught in different schools. This has effectively led to generations of students learning different historical ‘facts’. Lebanese filmmaker, Hady Zaccak, documented this phenomenon by interviewing and filming schoolchildren in five different schools in Lebanon which were chosen to represent different sectarian affiliations. The film showed that the students’ perceptions of history, as well as their views about different historical figures, were radically different.³³

Family, community and society

Personal Status Laws

The Constitution gives sects powers to establish their own personal status laws and judicial bodies, in which the state cannot intervene.³⁴ Lebanon has ten parallel sectarian and religious court systems that govern personal status matters. These courts operate independently, with little intervention or oversight from the Supreme Court. Notably, women are not allowed to serve on either Christian or Muslim religious courts and court rulings are often inconsistent, outdated, and harmful to litigants – especially women and children.³⁵

The majority of sectarian personal status laws make it very difficult, and in some cases impossible, for men and women from different religious backgrounds to get married. However, civil marriage ceremonies performed abroad are recognized, regardless of religious affiliation. In such cases, matters of inheritance are still dictated by religious courts (for example in the case of a Christian man marrying a Muslim woman, inheritance would not be permitted between partners).³⁶

Attempts to legalize civil marriage in Lebanon

In 2012, a Lebanese couple- Khoulood Sukkarieh and Nidal Darwich – used an innovative legal approach to secure recognition of their civil marriage ceremony. They cited a 1936 decree which states that individuals who do not belong to any sect are entitled to a civil union. The couple had previously removed reference to their sects (Sunni and Shia) from the civil registry.³⁷ Their son, born in 2013, became the first child in the country to be registered without a designated sect. Three years later, following death threats, the couple were granted asylum in Sweden.³⁸

In 2013, Lebanon’s Sunni Grand Mufti, Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Kabbani, issued a fatwa opposing civil marriage and called for anyone who approved it to be punished.

“Any Muslim with legal or executive authority in Lebanon who supports the legalization of civil marriage is an apostate and outside the religion of Islam [...] There are predators lurking among us, trying to sow the bacteria of civil marriage in Lebanon, but they should know that the religious scholars will not hesitate to do their duty.”³⁹

The Higher Shia Council likewise expressed opposition to the legalization of civil marriage. Historically, the Maronite Patriarchate had taken a similar position, urging “solidarity” with Lebanon’s Muslim community in rejecting civil marriage.⁴⁰

According to Wadih Asmar, president of the Lebanese Center for Human Rights, religious authorities’ opposition to civil marriages in Lebanon is driven by their fear of losing power over their communities. He also argues that religious authorities have a financial incentive to oppose civil marriages, as religious ceremonies generate significant income – estimated at over 10 million US dollars annually.⁴¹

ID Cards

Prior to 1990, Lebanese ID cards displayed an individual’s religious affiliation. However, following the end of the civil war – during which Lebanese citizens were targeted and murdered as a result of the religious affiliation of their ID cards – religion is no longer visible on newly issued cards. However, electronic data capturing religious affiliation remains embedded in the barcode of ID cards.⁴² An individual’s religious affiliation also appears on the civil registry *ikhraj qaid*. The *ikhraj qaid* captures personal status information and can be used instead of an ID card for government employment and university enrollment. Removing a reference to religious affiliation from an *ikhraj qaid* requires only a letter to the Ministry of the Interior. By February 2019, an estimated 10,000 people in Lebanon had removed their religious affiliation.⁴³

Discrimination against women

A review of personal status laws by Human Rights Watch in 2015 found “a clear pattern of women from all sects being treated worse than men when it comes to accessing divorce and primary care for their children”. The investigation found that women faced significant legal obstacles and discrimination as a result of court procedures.⁴⁴

Although parliament passed new laws in 2014 to protect women from domestic violence, many remain vulnerable. Marital rape has yet to be criminalized and religious sect-specific courts continue to hold jurisdiction – which often discriminate against women in marital matters.⁴⁵

Lebanon’s Decree No. 15 on Lebanese Nationality (1925)⁴⁶ restricts citizenship transmission primarily to fathers, preventing Lebanese women married to foreign nationals from passing citizenship to their children. Human rights organizations note that this discrimination can leave affected children and families in prolonged legal insecurity and, in some cases, at risk of statelessness.⁴⁷

LGBTI+ rights

While consensual same-sex relationships are not explicitly referred to under Lebanese law, Article 534 of the Penal Code⁴⁸ prohibits “sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature” and carries a sentence of up to one year. Article 534 has been used to arrest, prosecute, and harass the LGBTI+ community, effectively criminalizing consensual same-sex relations in practice.

In recent years, there have been instances in which Lebanese courts have pushed back against the application of Article 534. In 2017, Judge Rabih Maalouf refused to apply Article 534 in a case against nine individuals arrested by police in 2015. Judge Maalouf cited Article 183 of the Penal Code which declares that “an act undertaken in exercise of a right without abuse shall not be regarded as an offense.”⁴⁹ In 2018, the Appeals Court upheld the acquittal of the defendants and ruled that consensual same sex activity is not unlawful.⁵⁰ Despite these rulings, Article 534 remains in force and Lebanon has not adopted effective legal protections for the LGBTI+ community.

Same-sex marriages and civil unions in Lebanon are not legally recognized and there is no national ban on conversion therapy practices. There have been some instances in which individuals have been able to change their legal gender through court rulings, however, these are typically on a case-by-case basis and outcomes vary.⁵¹

In 2018, the Lebanese General Security Forces conducted a security raid and attempted to shut down the annual NEDWA (Networking, Exchange, Developments, Wellness, Achievement) conference – a regional conference on gender and sexuality organized by the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE) and held in Beirut since 2013. Human Rights Watch reported that the rationale for attempting to shut down the conference was unclear, but this was shortly followed by public statements from the Muslim Scholars Association calling for the organizers’ arrest and the cancellation of the conference on the grounds of “incitement to immorality.”⁵² The following year, the AFE arranged for the conference to take place outside of Lebanon as a result of the 2018 raid and the deteriorating situation for the LGBTI+ community.⁵³

Beirut is relatively tolerant of LGBTI+ rights when compared with other cities in Lebanon. After the 2020 chemical blast in Beirut, many Lebanese LGBTI+ community members who had built lives there reported losing much of what they once considered their ‘safe spaces’.⁵⁴

There has also been a rise in hate speech and attacks against members of the LGBTI+ community, from both Muslim and Christian radical groups.⁵⁵ For example, the last few years have seen the rise of a dangerous group called Junood Al Rab (Soldiers of God) in underprivileged Christian neighborhoods in the Greater Beirut Area. The group is a far-right Christian ultranationalist group that has carried out several violent attacks, including attacks on LGBTI+ people in Beirut.⁵⁶

The group has actively campaigned against and attacked LGBTI+ friendly spaces and symbols. In June 2022, they destroyed a billboard with the LGBTI+ rainbow flag set up by Beirut Pride, and in August 2023, they attacked an LGBTI+ friendly bar in Beirut, derailing a drag show and trapping people inside while shouting homophobic slurs. They accuse the LGBTI+ community of promoting “satanism” and warn that “families must be careful with their children; they [LGBTI+ people] kidnap them”. The members of the group also abide by a particular appearance that reflects their ultra-masculine worldview: muscular, tattooed, bearded, and often dressed in black.⁵⁷

Marginalization of Non-religious Individuals

As political representation, and even employment in the public sector, are largely dictated by religious quotas, non-religious individuals are therefore excluded from political representation and public employment. In a 2021 survey conducted by Freethought Lebanon of 644 atheists residing in the country, more than 97% of respondents indicated that “the Lebanese political system does not respect and is not inclusive to atheists.”⁵⁸

Moreover, atheists are largely discriminated against in the social sphere. 73% felt that they were treated unfairly by the Lebanese personal status laws and over 80% felt that Lebanese educational institutions instigate or incite hatred against atheists. 71% felt that their atheism, or expression thereof, might cause them legal problems in Lebanon, and 90% have practiced self-censorship on their views regarding atheism to avoid social or legal consequences. Atheists are often portrayed as “immoral”, “disloyal”, “untrustworthy”, “materialistic”, “satanic”, and as “foreign agents.” Many employers have dismissed atheist workers, viewing them as “morally corrupt” and as posing a reputational risk for the employer. Moreover, many atheists are physically and emotionally abused by family members, including forced evictions, violence, and death threats. Atheists are also vilified in the media.⁵⁹

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, assembly and association and Lebanon has a long tradition of press freedom. However, the media often self-censors as it is heavily dependent on the patronage of political parties and wealthy individuals.⁶⁰

There are significant limitations to freedom of expression as it intersects with freedom of religion or belief: by law, the government is permitted to censor religious publications if it deems such material incites sectarian discord or threatens national security. Criminal defamation clauses providing for prison sentences and fines also limit free expression.⁶¹ In addition criticism of the army, the President or religious authorities is strictly limited by law.⁶²

Films and other forms of art are regularly censored if they contain any material considered contentious. For instance, a film making a passing reference to Lebanon’s assassinated President, or a piece of graffiti caricaturing the King of Saudi Arabia.⁶³

"Blasphemy"

The Lebanese Penal Code contains three articles that effectively criminalize “blasphemy.” Article 473 of the Lebanese Penal code criminalizes “blaspheming God publicly”. This offense carries a prison term that can extend from one month to one year. Article 474 carries a maximum sentence of three years (with a minimum of six months) for contempt of religion and “defaming religious rites” or publicly insulting a religion or religious rites. Article 475 criminalizes the “distortion of religious rituals or ceremonies”, in addition to the desecration of religious and sacred objects.

In addition, Article 317 criminalizes “writings and speech intended to provoke sectarian or racial strife or [to] encourage conflict between different religious sects.” The maximum prison term is three years and can include a fine. According to Human Rights Watch Lebanon, these provisions are often applied in ways that restrict free speech and expression.⁶⁴

Highlighted Cases

Stand-up comedians in Lebanon, such as Nour Hajjar and Shaden Faqih, have faced immense pressure, including death threats and lawsuits, because they allegedly made jokes that were deemed insulting to religion.⁶⁵ Shaden Faqih, an openly lesbian woman, has since chosen to leave Lebanon and live abroad.⁶⁶ In late 2025, comedian Mario Moubarak faced a barrage of abuse on social media after a joke about Jesus from his performance circulated online. He also received numerous death threats after his phone number was shared online. Moubarak was publicly condemned by the Lebanese Catholic Media Center and a private complaint was filed under Articles 473 and 474 of the Penal Code. He was later detained at Beirut airport and released after his passport and phone were confiscated.⁶⁷

A Facebook user, Said Abdallah, was questioned by Lebanon’s Cybercrimes Bureau in 2021 and briefly jailed after complaints were made about his social media posts. Investigators allegedly blindfolded him, subjected him to insults and intimidation, and forced him to unlock his phone and delete posts. He was released eight days later after the public prosecutor referred the case to the criminal prosecutor. It followed an earlier episode in 2020, when he spent 46 days in detention over Facebook posts criticizing the President and content claimed to be offensive to Christianity.⁶⁸

In July 2019, Lebanese Byblos music festival was forced to cancel a planned performance of the band Mashrou' Leila "in order to prevent bloodshed and to maintain security and stability" following backlash from Christian fundamentalist groups. Reports vary regarding the precise cause of discontent. Some reports state that objections related to two songs in particular, which they alleged were "blasphemous," while others indicate that they related to a four-year-old post on Facebook of a controversial image that transposed the face of pop diva Madonna onto an image of the Virgin Mary, which they alleged insulted Christian beliefs.⁶⁹

Testimonies

"I am an agnostic atheist and I did come out proudly as one in Lebanon. As expected, I was cyber bullied for it but it didn't stop me from voicing my opinion on religion and its impact on society and especially on gender issues. I mostly hang out with fellow atheists now but before that, I lost friends because of my views. I tend to keep my religious views to myself at work because it could affect my relationship with colleagues and it is not worth it."

— Xena

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Malaysia

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Malaysia is a federal, multi-territory constitutional monarchy, split across two land masses separated by the South China Sea: Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. The country gained complete independence from British rule in 1963 and is now considered one of the most vibrant economies of South East Asia. It is a multi-ethnic federation of 13 states and three federal territories.¹

Malaysia's 2020 census shows that Islam is the dominant religion, with 63.5% of the population identifying as Muslim. The largest minority religions are Buddhism (18.7%), Christianity (9.1%), and Hinduism (6.1%). A smaller share reported no religious affiliation (1.8%) or were of other faiths (0.9%).²

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<p>The non-religious are barred from some government offices (including posts reserved for particular religions or sects)</p> <p>State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities</p>	<p>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</p>	<p>Government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious</p> <p>The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism</p> <p>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</p> <p>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</p> <p>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</p> <p>It is made difficult to register or operate an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization</p>	<p>'Apostasy' or conversion from a specific religion is outlawed and punishable by death</p> <p>It is illegal to advocate secularism or church-state separation, or such advocacy is suppressed</p> <p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted</p> <p>'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto 'blasphemy' laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>

<p>There is systematic religious privilege</p> <p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p> <p>There is an established church or state religion</p> <p>Legal or constitutional provisions exclude non-religious views from freedom of religion or belief</p> <p>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</p>	<p>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</p> <p>Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment</p> <p>Some concerns about children’s right to specifically freedom of religion or belief</p>	<p>There is significant social marginalization of the non-religious or stigma associated with expressing atheism, humanism or secularism</p> <p>Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis</p> <p>Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders</p> <p>Religious groups control some public or social services</p>	
<p>Official symbolic deference to religion</p> <p>Anomalous discrimination by local or provincial authorities, or overseas territories</p>			<p>Concerns that secular or religious authorities interfere in specifically religious freedoms</p>

Constitution and government

Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy with a ceremonial head of state who holds the title of Yang di-Pertuan Agong (“paramount ruler”) and who is elected for a five-year term from among nine hereditary state rulers. The monarch appoints a prime minister from among the members of the House of Representatives, usually the leader of the party winning the most seats in a general election.³

Malaysia is currently governed by a coalition government composed of Pakatan Harapan (PH), Barisan Nasional (BN), Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS), and several smaller parties. Following Malaysia’s 2022 General Election and the growing influence of the Islamist Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), there has been an increased implementation of Sharia-based laws and education policies. PAS has put pressure on the current government to adopt stricter, religious-based policies, and the party tends to view non-Muslims as a threat to the dominant role of Sunni Islam in society.⁴

In 2023, the President of PAS told reporters that the Chinese-Malaysian majority Democratic Action Party (DAP) seeks to dilute the Malay-Muslim race by pushing a secularist agenda. He claimed that its influence would ruin the country’s peace and stability, adding that non-Muslims’ wellbeing would be threatened if they “cross the line.”⁵ However, as PAS prepares for the next General

Election, due by early 2028, it is looking to soften its image. The party has been reducing the visibility of religious hardliners and championing moderate professionals who claim they can lead Malaysia towards economic prosperity and improve quality of life for Malaysians.

The Constitution of Malaysia⁶ was first established in 1957 and has been amended many times, most recently in 2025. Article 3 of the Constitution states that Islam is the religion of the country but that other religions may also be practiced in peace and harmony.

The State and Federal Territories have the power to restrict the type of Islam that may be practiced in the country, as outlined under Article 11.4:

“State law and in respect of the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya, federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.”

The Constitution also defines all ethnic Malays as Muslim in Article 160, meaning that, by law, ethnic Malays are not free to choose their own religion.

A constitutional change in 1988 limited the role of civil courts in matters treated as falling within Sharia jurisdiction. As a result, in disputes involving both legal systems, Sharia courts may rule on issues they regard as within their authority – including disputes in which non-Muslims are involved.⁷

Non-Muslims are legally restricted from attempting to convert Muslims, and enforcement and penalties differ by state. Punishments range from imprisonment to corporal punishment. By contrast, Islamic proselytization is not subject to the same limitations.⁸

Malaysia's Constitution assigns the King the role of highest Islamic authority in the Federal Territories and in four of the country's 13 states that do not have hereditary rulers (sultans). In the remaining nine states, the Sultans serve as the "Heads of Islam," and the King is chosen for a five-year term from among the Sultans. Islamic administration is primarily handled at state level through religious departments, councils, and muftis, with the Head of Islam exercising authority over Islamic institutions, including Sharia courts.⁹

Registration of religious groups

Religious groups are not generally required to register with the government, but registration is typically required to obtain formal legal status (for example, as a non-profit or charitable organization). Many groups choose to formalize their legal status for practical reasons – such as opening bank accounts – and for tax-related advantages. Formal status is typically undertaken with the Registrar of Societies and some religious groups, including non-Sunni Islamic groups, have reported difficulties in obtaining registration approval. Recognized organizations can access tax exemptions or benefits and Muslims may claim a rebate for zakat (Islamic tithes) donations.¹⁰

State impunity

The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) has been central to public debate about accountability in enforced-disappearance cases, including those of activist Amri Che Mat and pastor Raymond Koh. In October 2024, a government report asserted that the disappearances were not authorized by the state and attributed responsibility to "rogue" officers. Family members and civil society actors have continued to press for transparent investigations and accountability.¹¹

Education and children's rights

Malaysia's public-school curriculum involves mandatory religious education – as either Islamic education (for Muslim students) or as moral and ethics studies (for non-Muslim students). Religious education for non-Muslims is more commonly pursued outside the public-school curriculum through private schooling or community-based education.¹²

Private Islamic schools, such as Sekolah Agama Rakyat and *tahfiz* schools, may receive selective government grants – typically conditional upon registration, government supervision, and compliance with approved curricula.

In October 2019, reports that a Christian prayer was read at a student awards ceremony drew strong objections from several Islamic groups and prompted a police inquiry. The investigation involved questioning and police taking statements from the school's staff. The incident contrasts with the common use of Islamic prayers in Malaysian schools, particularly in formal settings such as assemblies.¹³

Islamic Studies in Public Schools

In order to graduate from secondary school, Muslim students must undertake compulsory Islamic subjects. In August 2018, there was public outcry after it became known that some educational materials used in public schools for obtaining the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education) – equivalent to O' Levels or GED – included violent topics. What appears to be a leaked state-level trial examination paper on Islamic Studies included a question on the permissible ways to "hit a disobedient wife".¹⁴ Shortly after, another image from a textbook on Islamic Studies was leaked. The textbook read that death is a reasonable punishment for *murtads* (ex-Muslims).¹⁵

Tahfiz Schools

Malaysia has roughly 1,200 *tahfiz* institutions. These are religious schools that typically prioritise Quran memorization and do not have to follow the standard national syllabus. In recent years, the government has focused on improving oversight and standardizing regulation across the sector.¹⁶

In April 2017, an 11-year-old school boy died after suffering abuse at a *tahfiz* school in the state of Johor. The boy, along with fellow school children, had been whipped on the legs with a water hose by an assistant warden.¹⁷

In 2024, the Global Ikhwan Services and Business Holdings (GISBH) conglomerate, linked to a banned religious sect, saw authorities rescue hundreds of children from its welfare homes where they were allegedly sexually abused and neglected. Children were reportedly exposed to religious extremism and videos containing militant themes. The case exposed significant weaknesses in child protection and oversight of religious institutions.¹⁸

Such cases, as well as the problem of school buildings being found unsafe,¹⁹ had previously forced the government to declare that all *tahfiz* schools must be regulated or shut down. However, unregistered institutions continue to exist throughout Malaysia.²⁰

Child marriage

The issue of child marriage remains a problem in Malaysia, largely due to the lack of a standard legal minimum age of marriage. With parental consent, Sharia courts are able to grant permission for girls to marry under the legal age of 16 and boys under the legal age of 18.²¹

In June 2018, the marriage of a 41-year-old Malaysian man to an 11-year-old child was posted on social media by his second wife. The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Women and Family Development, Datuk Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, stated that the 11-year-old girl “consented” to the marriage.²²

After a government investigation, the man was fined a total of MYR 1,800 (USD 434) by the Gua Musang Syariah court for solemnizing the marriage and for polygamy without obtaining the court’s permission. Each charge consisted of a fine of MYR 900 (USD 217). The man, however, remains married to the child.²³

At the time, the Deputy Prime Minister claimed that the Federal Government did not have the power to nullify child marriage as it fell under Islamic Sharia laws.²⁴ Following public outcry, the federal government decided to take measures to increase the minimum age of marriage to 18 for both Muslims and non-Muslims. However, the Mufti of Sabah, Datuk Bungsu Aziz Jaafar, spoke out against it, and suggested lowering the minimum age of marriage to 14 and suggesting that children are “now more mature”, sparking public outrage.²⁵

Unilateral conversion of children to Islam

Under federal law it is illegal for one parent to convert a child’s religion without the consent of the other parent. However, under some state laws it is legal. Most courts rule against the practice in the majority of cases, however there are exceptions.

In 2018, Malaysia’s Federal Court ruled that converting the three children of Hindu mother, Indira Gandhi, to Islam without her consent was unlawful. The ruling stated that both parents must consent to the religious conversion of their children.²⁶ In March 2023, a petition was filed with the Kuala Lumpur High Court by Indira Gandhi and 13 others seeking to invalidate all state laws that permitted the unilateral religious conversion of a child. The plaintiffs argued that the laws are unconstitutional and in contradiction to the 2018 Federal Court ruling. Seven states and three Federal Territories were identified in the petition as allowing unilateral religious conversion of children without the consent of the other parent.²⁷

In October 2023, the High Court granted permission to the Islamic Religious Councils of the Federal Territory (MAIWP) and Johor (MAIJ) to intervene in the case. The court, however, dismissed a similar application from Badan Peguam Syarie Wilayah Persekutuan (BPSWP), a statutory bar body for Sharia lawyers in Malaysia’s Federal Territories. One of the original defendants, the state of Pahang, was removed from the suit after it amended its state laws to require the consent of both parents, a move seen as a positive development by the plaintiffs.²⁸ In October 2025, the court dismissed the MAIWP’s attempts to prevent the lawsuit and the case is scheduled to be heard in February 2026.²⁹

The legal landscape has been further shaped by the case of Loh Siew Hong, a Buddhist-Hindu mother of three whose husband converted himself and his children to Islam without her consent. In January 2024, the Court of Appeal ruled in her favor. This was followed by a Federal Court ruling in May 2024 and a final review in April 2025 which decisively ruled against the unilateral conversion.³⁰ The case reinforced the precedent set in Indira Gandhi’s 2018 court ruling. These rulings are expected to significantly bolster the arguments of the 14 plaintiffs in their ongoing High Court challenge.³¹

Family, community and society

Sharia law

Muslims are subject to Sharia law, the interpretation of which can vary according to the state. This means that Muslims and non-Muslims are treated differently in “moral” and family law cases. Non-Muslims may also be directly affected by Sharia courts in certain circumstances – such as when one spouse in a non-Muslim marriage has converted to Islam.³² The relationship between Sharia and civil law remains problematic in Malaysia’s legal system.

In 2023, Malaysia’s parliament passed sweeping legal reforms to remove the mandatory death penalty at the federal level, though this does not necessarily apply to state Sharia enactments.³³ In February 2024, Malaysia’s Federal Court struck down 16 Sharia-based laws from Kelantan state, declaring them unconstitutional.³⁴

Malaysia’s federal structure limits state powers regarding serious criminal penalties and state Sharia courts have been constrained in the severity of the punishments they can impose. The restraint is a result of the Sharia Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 (Act 355).³⁵ This federal law stipulates the maximum punishments that Sharia courts are permitted to impose and they are currently limited to:

- A prison term of up to three years;
- A fine of up to MYR 5,000; and
- A maximum of six strokes of the cane.

Any punishment prescribed by a state Sharia enactment that exceeds these limits, including the death penalty, is *ultra vires* (beyond its legal power) and therefore unenforceable.

The state of Terengganu is subsequently reviewing its own Sharia laws³⁶ while Kelantan state is planning to revise and reintroduce provisions that were annulled.³⁷

Enforced religious identity

Muslims are prohibited from possessing or circulating publications and other materials that authorities consider inconsistent with Sunni teachings of the Shafi’i school of Islam. Those that do, can be convicted of “deviant” religious activity and face state-level Sharia penalties. The punishments vary depending on the state, and can

include imprisonment (of up to three years), caning, and a MYR 5,000 (USD 1,100) fine.³⁸

In Malaysia, individuals are required to carry a national identity card called MyKad. The person's religion is recorded electronically and, for Muslims, their religion is displayed on the front of the card. The authorities use MyKad to determine when Sharia jurisdiction applies.³⁹

Marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims are not officially recognized and children born from such unions are considered illegitimate. In order to marry a Muslim, a non-Muslim must convert to Islam for the Sharia court to officially recognize the marriage.⁴⁰

According to Malaysian human rights organizations, the official narrative of national unity has led to the suppression of religious and ethnic diversity in the country. It has been claimed that Malaysia's indigenous population is losing its cultural identity and right to practice their own religion and customs.⁴¹

In 2023, the Sultan of the state of Selangor declared that there was nothing to stop Muslims from visiting non-Muslim places of worship for social reasons, provided they did not join rituals. He also announced that it was illegal for Muslims to learn about other religions, to prevent proselytization.⁴²

"Apostasy"

Non-Muslims are not legally restricted from changing religious affiliation and may request recognition as non-religious by changing their status to "tidak ada agama" (no religion) at the National Registration Department (NRD). Muslims who seek legal recognition of leaving Islam, however, must obtain approval through a Sharia court process, and such approvals are rarely granted in practice.

As Islamic law is administered at state level, "apostasy"-related offenses and penalties differ across Malaysia. Some states provide for fines or imprisonment (including Perak, Melaka, Sabah, and Pahang), Pahang also permits caning (of up to six strokes), and Kelantan and Terengganu list a maximum penalty of death – though that penalty has never been imposed.⁴³

In 2000, Lina Joy, born Azlina Jailani, sought to have her conversion from Islam to Christianity recognized legally. Her case was rejected and became a landmark controversy. She took her appeal to the Federal Court which, in 2007, upheld the ruling that she must obtain Sharia court approval to renounce Islam, effectively denying her request. The case sparked national debate about freedom of religion and the jurisdiction of Sharia versus civil courts. Lina Joy's conversion was not recognized and she reportedly left Malaysia due to safety concerns.⁴⁴

In 2023, members of the Bateq Mayah Orang Asli community in Pahang brought a legal challenge seeking to overturn their recorded status as Muslims. They argued that they were forced to convert to Islam and called on the court to rule that they are free to practice their own indigenous spiritual and cultural traditions. They claimed that they experienced intimidation and warnings and that, if they refused to convert, it could have resulted in the loss of their property and livelihoods.⁴⁵

In 2025, a 47-year-old Malaysian man attempted to return to Christianity after converting to Islam 14 years prior. His case was dismissed and the court stated he could apply again before the Sharia court, effectively putting him at risk of criminal prosecution. The cases underscore the systemic challenges faced by those seeking to convert from Islam.⁴⁶

Government threat to "hunt down" atheists

In August 2017, members of an atheist meetup group affiliated with the Atheist Republic Facebook page posed for a photograph at a social event in Kuala Lumpur. Those in attendance were smiling and making 'peace' signs towards the camera. The photograph was circulated widely online, leading to death threats and a government-led witch hunt against members of the group.

The government reportedly planned to launch a "detailed investigation" into whether any Muslims had joined the group. A Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Dr Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, asked that the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (SKMM) intervene as the group involved "the faith of Muslims in the country." He told reporters that "if it is proven that there are Muslims involved in atheist activities that could affect their faith, the state Islamic religious departments, or Jawi, could take action. I have asked for Jawi to look into this grave allegation."⁴⁷

A Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim, said the public should aid authorities in locating groups, like the Kuala Lumpur affiliate of Atheist Republic, so that action could be taken.⁴⁸

"The (Federal Constitution) does not mention atheists. It goes against the Constitution and human rights...I suggest that we hunt them down vehemently and we ask for help to identify these groups."

— Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim

The Inspector General of Police, Khalid Abu Bakar, also warned Muslims or Malays against attending such events. He declared that it was not their "right to attend" atheist events as they were against the Malaysian constitution. The Inspector General went on to say that "the police would scrutinize the existing laws to enable appropriate action to be taken should the atheist group cause anxiety for Muslims."⁴⁹

Claim that atheism is “unconstitutional”

Following the verbal attacks on the Atheist Republic meetup, the freedom to hold or to express atheist views was targeted by government ministers. It was claimed that atheism is “unconstitutional” and punishable under Sharia and sedition laws. This is purely a political interpretation, however, as legally there is no clause prohibiting atheism in the Constitution.⁵⁰

LGBTI+ rights

In Malaysia, sexual contact between two people of the same gender is illegal. LGBTI+ rights are largely unrecognized in the country and there is extensive discrimination against LGBTI+ people, including state funding of so-called “conversion therapies.”⁵¹

Sections 377A and B of the Penal Code,⁵² a British colonial law, criminalizes consensual “carnal knowledge against the order of nature,” which is punishable by up to 20 years in prison and a mandatory whipping. Section 377D criminalizes outrages of decency. Sharia law at both the state and federal level criminalize both same-sex activity as well as gender nonconformity.⁵³ Under the state-administered Sharia law, *Liwat* (sexual relations between men), *musahaqah* (sexual relations between women), and a ‘male person posing as a woman’ and a ‘female person posing as a man’ are also criminalized. Six states in Malaysia impose a maximum penalty of a MYR 5,000 fine, three years of imprisonment and six strokes for *musahaqah*.

Under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s administration, there has been a noticeable intensification of anti-LGBTI+ rhetoric and actions. Authorities have expanded censorship powers and LGBTI+ individuals have been specifically targeted with discriminatory rhetoric and crackdowns. Levels of discrimination, hostility and violence towards sexual minorities are reported to be rising.⁵⁴

Numerous books, films and merchandise considered to promote an LGBTI+ lifestyle have been banned.⁵⁵ In 2023, the government banned the sale of watches and accessories by the Swiss watchmaker, Swatch, which had an LGBTI+ theme. The ban was imposed under Section 7 of the country’s Printing Presses and Publications Act,⁵⁶ relating to items deemed as potentially “detrimental to public order, morality or security.”⁵⁷ In the same year, the Ministry of Communications and Digital cut short the Good Vibes Festival following an onstage kiss between male band members of The 1975 who were protesting Malaysia’s anti-LGBTI+ laws.⁵⁸

Muslim members of the LGBTI+ community are particularly targeted. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in 2025 police and officers from the Federal Department for Islamic Development (JAKIM) raided a Halloween party in Kuala Lumpur for the local LGBTI+ community. They arrested only those whose identity cards identified them

as Muslim. “Conversion therapy” camps (*mukhayyams*), which are organized by JAKIM, specifically target and force Muslim members of the LGBTI+ community to undergo “rehabilitation.”⁵⁹

Women’s rights

Corporal Punishment of Muslim Women

The Criminal Procedure Code prohibits caning women, however, Sharia law permits it. As a result, Muslim women are disproportionately vulnerable to caning, corporal punishment, and torture.

On 28 September 2018, a 30-year-old single mother who pleaded guilty to offering sexual services to a man, was ordered to be given six strokes of the cane and jailed for six months by the Sharia High Court in Terengganu. The prosecution was conducted by a Sharia prosecutor, while the woman had no legal representation.⁶⁰

In April 2018, two women in Terengganu were arrested for allegedly attempting to engage in sexual acts in a car. The women were later taken to the Sharia High Court where they were fined and caned six times each. The caning took place in front of up to 100 people.⁶¹

Social control

Muslim women are particularly subject to discrimination and social control in Malaysia. Religious authorities, together with the police force, are known to conduct raids on hotels and make arrests for *khalwat* (close proximity) between unmarried Muslims.⁶² Although specific punishments for violation of *khalwat* vary from state to state, it is typically punishable by some combination of imprisonment up to two years, a fine of MYR 3,000 (USD 940), or several strokes of the cane.

In 2023, stand-up comedian Siti Nuramira Abdullah was fined MYR 8,000 (approximately USD 1,800) under section 298 of Malaysia’s Penal Code. The penalty followed a 2022 comedy performance in which she removed her headscarf on stage. She pleaded guilty to charges framed as “insulting Islam” and “wounding the religious feelings of others”, which allowed her to avoid a custodial sentence. Her husband was also fined MYR 16,000 (USD 3,500), in place of an eight-month jail term, for posting a video of her performance online. The episode was emblematic of how women are often subject to public and online shaming when they do not conform to religious conceptions of “modesty.”⁶³

In January 2023, a woman who was involved in a car accident in Selangor state attempted to lodge a police report. As she was wearing shorts at the time, she was refused entry to the police station until she changed clothing.⁶⁴ In 2024, female athletes were banned from representing the state in diving competitions in Terengganu due to attire considered inappropriate by religious authorities.⁶⁵

Female Genital Mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is widely practiced in Malaysia. According to a 2012 study by Dr Maznah Dahlui, associate professor at the University of Malaya's Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, as many as 93% of women surveyed had undergone the procedure. In 2009, the National Fatwa Council issued a fatwa making FGM mandatory. In response some medics started offering to perform the procedure in a bid for it to be carried out in a safe environment but many doctors and activists are fighting for a change in the law and the United Nations (UN) has called for the fatwa to be abrogated and for all forms of FGM to be prohibited.⁶⁶

In 2018, JAKIM published guidelines for the medicalization of the practice, aiming to standardize and regulate it within medical settings. This move has been criticized by international organizations which argue that medicalization does not eliminate the human rights concerns associated with FGM.⁶⁷

In June 2024, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Committee report on Malaysia stressed that "female genital mutilation cannot be justified on religious grounds and constitutes a harmful practice to exert control over the bodies and sexuality of women and girls is in violation of the Convention, irrespective of whether or not these practices are performed within or outside a medical institution."⁶⁸

Raising women's rights as a political issue

In 2019, Maria Chin Abdullah, a Member of Parliament (MP), was charged with contempt of court for publicly criticizing the Sharia courts' unfavorable treatment of women. In 2022, the Sharia High Court sentenced her to seven days in prison. Ms Chin filed a petition appealing the decision and 70 politicians and MPs signed a joint statement expressing their concern with the charge. They asserted that the judiciary must not be immune from criticism or accountability. In June 2025, the Federal Court dismissed Ms Chin's appeal, effectively ending her ability to challenge the Sharia High Court sentence.⁶⁹

In 2014, a fatwa was issued against Sisters in Islam, a civil society group working to promote the rights of Muslim women. The fatwa declared that the organization and "any individuals, organizations and institutions holding on to liberalism and religious pluralism" are deviant from Islamic teachings. In 2019, the High Court dismissed a challenge by the organization and it was upheld in 2023.⁷⁰ However, in a landmark decision in June 2025, the Federal Court ruled that the fatwa could not be applied to Sisters in Islam as it is registered as a company and not a person professing the religion of Islam.⁷¹

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The Constitution provides protections for freedom of expression, assembly, and association under Article 10. However, these protections are not absolute, and are subject to wide-ranging exemptions enumerated in several articles.

Freedom of expression is constitutionally guaranteed but severely restricted in practice. For example, Article 10 includes a provision which allows Parliament to pass laws that restrict these freedoms in the interest of public order, morality and security. The freedoms are further restricted by several other articles, most notably Article 153, which grants the King of Malaysia powers to "safeguard the special position of the Malays." Discussion of these articles, even by members of Parliament, is illegal.

Pervasive Sharia and "blasphemy"

Offenses relating to religion are outlined in Malaysia's Penal Code. Convictions can result in prison sentences of up to two years or a fine. Prison terms can be increased to up to 20 years if there is physical harm or damage to property.⁷² The offenses are found under Article 295 "injuring or defiling a place of worship," Article 296 "disturbing a religious assembly," Article 298 "uttering words with deliberate intent to wound the religious feelings of any person," and Article 298A "causing... disharmony, disunity, or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill will, or prejudicing...the maintenance of harmony or unity, on grounds of religion." A 3R (race, religion and royalty) task force was formed by the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) in 2023 which is aimed at investigating complaints of insults to race, religion and royalty. The Inspector-General of Police declared that the task force would undertake "strict action" against those who disrupt "harmony and public order."⁷³

In 2024, the film *Mentega Terbang*, which deals with religion and grief, was banned under the Film Censorship Act⁷⁴ following condemnation and threats from religious conservatives.⁷⁵ Both the film's director and producer were subsequently charged for "wounding religious feelings." The filmmakers requested a judicial review against the government's banning of the film and appealed their charges. However, the judicial review and appeal were dismissed and the criminal case is ongoing at the time of writing.⁷⁶

The states of Kedah and Selangor maintain bans on non-Muslims using the word "Allah" under decrees by their Sultans, who hold religious authority. Both Kedah and Selangor's Sultans issued decrees in 2021 declaring "Allah" as exclusive to Muslims in the state and prohibiting non-Muslims from using the word. The decrees followed a decision by the Kuala Lumpur High Court that ruled that a 1986 federal regulation banning the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims was unconstitutional.⁷⁷

Media freedoms

State broadcasters and publishers reflect government views. Most private publishers and broadcasters are controlled by political parties or business groups allied with the government, and they generally censor programming according to government guidelines. Books and films are directly censored or banned for profanity, violence, and political and religious material, as well as pro-LGBTI+ content.⁷⁸

While there have been some steps towards reform, repressive laws still hold; in particular the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998,⁷⁹ the Sedition Act 1948,⁸⁰ and the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984. Despite promises by the government during the general election campaign of 2022 that it would revise laws restricting freedom of expression, these measures remain in force and continue to be used to limit critical speech, with public figures, artists, and ordinary internet users facing investigations or charges. In addition, amendments hurriedly passed at the end of 2024 to the Communications and Media Act further increased restrictions, reinforcing the use of these laws to suppress dissenting voices.⁸¹

Freedom of Assembly

The Peaceful Assembly Act 2012,⁸² is used by police to impose restrictions on protests and investigate those who participate in allegedly illegal protests. Over recent years there have been reports of activists being subjected to police harassment and criminal charges.

There is a large NGO sector in the country, including organizations who campaign for political reforms. Some NGOs have been denied registration or seen their registration revoked for political reasons.⁸³

Sevan Doraisamy, Executive Director of the human rights organization Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), has been subjected to ongoing judicial harassment – with over 20 police investigations during his 25 years of human rights work. These investigations have been related to organizing public human rights forums and exposing alleged police abuses.⁸⁴

Highlighted Cases

In October 2019, writer and activist Maryam Lee reported that she had been summoned for questioning by the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) under Section 58 (1) of the Syariah Criminal Procedure Enactment (Selangor) 2003. While JAIS failed to provide a reason for the order, Lee believes that it is connected to her book *Unveiling Choice*, which was published by Gerakbudaya Enterprise and launched on 13 April 2019. The book argues that Malay Muslim women should have the right to decide if they wish to wear a tudung.

The discussion at the launch of the book garnered backlash on social media from individuals who had not attended the session, including the Minister for the Department for Religious Affairs. According to media reports, this backlash prompted JAIS to launch an investigation.⁸⁵

In March 2019, Alister Cogia (22 years old) was sentenced to almost 11 years imprisonment for "blasphemy" on social media, via his "Ayea Yea" Facebook account. Three others were being held without bail while awaiting trial for the same charges for "insulting Islam and the Prophet" under the Penal Code and Communications Act. Mohamad Yazid Kong Abdullah (52), owner of the "Yazid Kong" Facebook account, pleaded guilty after he was charged in the Criminal Sessions Court. Chow Mun Fai (43), operating Twitter account @ALVINCHOW333, faced eight charges. Danny Antoni (28), pleaded not guilty to two charges in relation to his personal Facebook account. Subsequently, in July 2020, Danny Antoni was sentenced to 26 months in prison for Facebook posts allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad and Islam. In a statement about the cluster of cases, Inspector-General of Police Fuzi Harun advised the public not to abuse social media by uploading or sharing any form of provocation touching on religious or racial sensitivities.⁸⁶

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Malta

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Malta is a small, densely-populated, nation in the Mediterranean, south of Sicily and north of Libya. It gained independence from the UK in 1964 and became a parliamentary republic in 1974.

An estimated 544,000 people live on the three islands that make up the archipelago.¹ Despite the increasing ethnic diversity on the islands,² the 2021 census showed

that 83% of the population identify as Catholic. The next most common religious affiliation, accounting for some 5% of the population, was “none.”³ In comparison to previous census data, it would appear that the Catholic population is decreasing (See ‘Family, Community and Society’, below).

Malta joined the European Union in 2004.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<p>There is systematic religious privilege</p> <p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p> <p>There is an established church or state religion</p> <p>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</p>	<p>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</p> <p>Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment</p>	<p>There is significant social marginalization of the non-religious or stigma associated with expressing atheism, humanism or secularism</p> <p>Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders</p>	
<p>Official symbolic deference to religion</p>			<p>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</p>

Constitution and government

Under the Constitution,⁴ Roman Catholicism is the State religion:

Article 2:

- (1) The religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion.
- (2) The authorities of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong.

Nevertheless, freedom of conscience, religion and expression are protected under Article 32:

...every person in Malta is entitled to the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, that is to say, the right, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, but subject to respect for the rights

and freedoms of others and for the public interest, to each and all of the following[...]

- (b) freedom of conscience, of expression and of peaceful assembly and association

In addition, Article 40 states,

- (1) All persons in Malta shall have full freedom of conscience and enjoy the free exercise of their respective mode of religious worship.

In 2020, Prime Minister Robert Abela said:

“Malta is a secular state, but the constitution also affords a strong, fundamental freedom that everyone is entitled to his religion of choice”.⁵

He did not explain how the State can be secular given Article 2 of the Constitution. Secularism is seldom addressed in public discourse.

Religious Privilege

Preference to the Roman Catholic Church is endemic and ingrained in Maltese culture. A number of Concordats with the Vatican remain in force,⁶ which together establish a framework for Church-State relations, including regarding the use of religious buildings, Catholic religious education in schools, and marriages conducted by the Roman Catholic Church.

As a result of a 1995 Concordat, only Roman Catholic weddings are considered to have the same legal weight as civil marriage under the Marriage Act.⁷ All other non-Catholic weddings, including humanist weddings, must be conducted in the presence of a registrar to be legally recognized.

Roman Catholic members (not further defined) of the medical profession are required by law to abide by the tenets of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion.⁸ At the time of writing, no examples of the clause having been used have been found. However, the existence of this clause has the potential to have negative consequences on the provision of care should assisted dying or surrogacy be legalized, or abortion rights extended, as they represent conflict with Catholic tenets.

Since 1974 a secular affirmation in place of an oath, in courts and elsewhere, has been legally available.⁹ However, the default convention is for oaths to be taken on a crucifix, including for elected parliamentarians.

Official symbolic deference to Roman Catholicism is pervasive across the public sector, and appears to form part of public policy. For example, prior to each parliamentary sitting, a prayer is recited.¹⁰ The motto of the national police force is “Domine Direge Nos” (Lord, guide us).¹¹

All public buildings including hospitals and classrooms display crucifixes. Government ministers have previously intervened to ensure that religious iconography may be displayed in public buildings. For example, in 2019, then Health Minister Chris Fearne ordered the withdrawal of a circular requiring the removal of religious items and images (but not crucifixes) from Mater Dei, the main State hospital.¹² Policy on the retention of crucifixes and religious symbols in Mater Dei was reiterated in 2025.¹³ Furthermore, in 2020, the Prime Minister intervened to reinstate a large cross on a hilltop, which had been removed following a Planning Authority enforcement order.¹⁴ Significant amounts of state funding are also allocated to church restoration projects.¹⁵

In 2021, the Government co-sponsored a draft resolution to give the Vatican a more active role in UN health discussions, including reproductive and sexual rights.¹⁶

There are only rare examples of mainstream politicians speaking up against Roman Catholic teachings and tradition. They include the following:

– In December 2024, Labour politician Daniel Micallef repeated his support for Assisted Dying, which he previously gave when he was the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party;¹⁷

– In December 2024, Labour Party Health Minister Joe Etienne Abela repeated his support for “doctor-assisted dying” in extreme circumstances;¹⁸

– In January 2022, when she became European Parliament President in 2022, MEP Roberta Metsola (a member of the Nationalist Party – Partit Nazzjonalista) voted against abortion in the national parliament, declaring her vote was the European Parliament’s (pro-choice) position;¹⁹ and

– Between 2020 and 2024, while an MEP for the Labour Party, Cyrus Engerer called for abortion to be included in the European Charter of fundamental rights,²⁰ and has expressed support for pro-choice activists in Malta.²¹

Equality

In 2016, a law²² was proposed to replace the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality with a more powerful Human Rights and Equality Commission, with powers to act on complaints about discrimination based on protected characteristics such as gender, nationality, age, sexual orientation, health status and social origin. The bill prompted concern about the implications for employment in Church schools; conscientious objection; religious manifestations; and the burden of proof.²³ The process stalled.

In 2019, two revised, but related, bills were presented to parliament, but there has been no known progress since then, despite the prime minister’s announcement in 2023 that the issue was back on the agenda,²⁴ and despite Malta’s commitment to the UN to create a national Human Rights institution by 2025 in accordance with the UN Paris Principles.²⁵

Religious Minorities

Religious minorities are not required to register with, nor be licensed by, the State. Religious or other affiliation is not included in identity documents

Education and Children’s Rights

State-Subsidized Religious Schools

About 30% of primary and secondary students attend private schools,²⁶ which are predominantly run by the Roman Catholic Church, and funded to a large extent by the State (see ‘Religious Privilege’, above). Non-religious educators are employed in Roman Catholic Church Schools, and entry to the schools is not wholly restricted to Roman Catholic pupils, although a small proportion of schools only accept baptized Christian students. School admission documents show that there are only two instances where private schools will accept only Catholic students.²⁷

Religious education

Article 2 (3) of the Constitution prescribes teaching of the Roman Catholic faith as compulsory in all State schools:

“Religious teaching of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Faith shall be provided in all State schools as part of compulsory education.”

However, this is restricted by Article 40, which provides exceptions for those whose parent/guardian decides otherwise. Article 40 (2) states that:

“No person shall be required to receive instruction in religion or to show knowledge or proficiency in religion if, in the case of a person who has not attained the age of sixteen years, objection to such requirement is made by the person who agreeing to law has authority over him and, in any other case, if the person so required objects thereto[...].”

In *Religious Education in a Multicultural Europe*, MEP Mary Darmanin notes:

“Although not obliged to be denominational by the Education Act, State schools in Malta function as de facto Catholic schools in terms of their school ethos and formal RE [religious education] curriculum.”

According to anecdotal evidence provided by Humanists Malta, this largely remains the case 11 years later.

Ethics Education

In 2014, primary, middle and secondary state schools began to introduce ethics classes as an alternative for students whose parents/guardians opt them out of religious education. Humanists Malta were consulted on the syllabus for the new subject.²⁸

In 2024, it was reported that candidates sitting the end of secondary school (‘O’ level) ethics exams have increased from 38 in 2018 to 738 in 2024. And, following the introduction of the 2024-2030 National Education Strategy, ethics classes will be available to 13-year-old students as an optional subject, alongside, rather than necessarily as an alternative to, religious education.²⁹

Sex Education

Whilst there are increasingly effective programs in some schools, including in some Roman Catholic schools (which, under a Vatican Concordat, are not obliged to provide any sex education),³⁰ sex education can be inconsistent.³¹ This may be at least in part as a result of the failure of government guidelines on sexuality and relationships education,³² last issued in 2013, to set an obligatory syllabus, thereby leaving the teaching of the subject open to interpretation. As a result, inappropriate materials are reportedly still used, including, albeit now rarely, the discredited 1984 anti-abortion video “The

Silent Scream”.³³ Furthermore, there have been instances in which anti-abortion groups have been given a platform to contribute to sex education classes by school officials without pro-choice advocates being afforded the same opportunity.³⁴

According to various surveys,³⁵ many young people remain under-informed about safe sex, sexual relationships, and sexual orientation. They are often exposed to Roman Catholic doctrine, which emphasizes abstinence. Objections by parents have also been raised to any sex education without express parental consent.³⁶ A 2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study found that unprotected sex among Maltese girls was higher than the EU average. 40% of girls and 28% of boys in Malta reportedly used neither condoms nor the contraceptive pill during their last intercourse, though the use of condoms and the pill has increased.³⁷

Likely as a result, Malta has higher rates of teen pregnancy than the EU average,³⁸ and high rates of sexually-transmitted infections (see also ‘Sexual and Reproductive Health’, below).³⁹

In December 2024, the government launched a consultation document on an updated National Sexual Health Strategy 2025-30 which noted that:

“Children and young people who do not receive high-quality, age and developmentally appropriate sexuality and relationship education may be left vulnerable to harmful sexual behaviours[...].”

The government called for comprehensive, evidence-based sex education ensuring consistency across all schools (State, Church, and independent).⁴⁰ The calls have received support from some parents and students.⁴¹

Family, community and society

The place of religion in society

In the 2021 State of the Nation survey, 93.5% said they believed in God; 3% did not; 3.5% did not know.⁴² Furthermore, a 2021 Eurobarometer survey found that religion was not important at all for 9% of Maltese; not important for 20%; important for 58%; and of maximum importance for 22%.⁴³

This would appear to be supported by 2019 Census data, which indicates that, between 1967 and 2017, weekly mass attendance declined from 81% to just over 36%; the only age group that did not see a decline in attendance was among those aged 65 or above.⁴⁴ A 2022 EY Generate Youth survey found that just under half of Maltese aged 16-24 believe in God – even fewer in organized religion.⁴⁵

Roman Catholic weddings have also been in decline since 2015, with civil unions in 2023 outnumbering religious ones: 1,274 versus 965, respectively.⁴⁶

Social Attitudes Towards the Non-Religious

Humanists Malta are not aware of any significant societal actions against the non-religious, beyond criticism from individuals in social and national media.⁴⁷ However, non-religious Maltese from religious families can face rejection, opposition, or intolerance (See 'Testimonies', below).

Anecdotal evidence from members of Humanists Malta suggests that, when taking an oath in court, the assumption is that one is Roman Catholic, and must actively decline the religious oath rather than being offered a choice by clerks of the court in the first instance. Non-religious participants in court proceedings are likely to abstain from this option anyway, fearing a negative bias (see 'Testimonies', below).

LGBTI+ Rights

Malta has historically been seen as leading the way on LGBTI+ legal rights globally.⁴⁸ Discrimination based on sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression, has been banned since 2004.⁴⁹ Same-sex civil unions were legalized in 2014,⁵⁰ and same-sex marriages in 2017.⁵¹

The 2015 Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act⁵² permits transgender people to change their legal gender without medical interventions, and bans surgeries on intersex infants. In 2016, Malta was the first EU state to ban so-called "conversion therapy"⁵³ and in 2023, it was made illegal for anyone to promote the practice.⁵⁴

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are allowed to serve openly in the military.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, prejudice still exists. In 2024, the government of Malta's Human Rights Directorate said, on LGBTI+ equality:⁵⁶

"We recognize that challenges remain. We must continue to address societal attitudes that still present barriers to full equality[...]"

"In December 2023, the European Commission published the Special Eurobarometer Report on Discrimination [...] Perceptions of LGBTIQ+ discrimination in Malta remain significant, highlighting ongoing challenges despite progressive legal frameworks. The survey revealed that a substantial portion of respondents [...] perceive discrimination as widespread. 20% of respondents still believe LGBTIQ+ individuals should not have the same rights as heterosexual and cisgender persons [...] while 69% of respondents feel comfortable with a lesbian, gay, or bisexual colleague, only 42% would feel comfortable with a transgender person in the highest elected political position."

Examples of such prejudice include concerns raised in 2023 by Nationalist Party MP Julie Zahra regarding a

performance by a well-known arts group aiming to teach young people about gender fluidity.⁵⁷ In the same year, during Europride, a group of queer people faced verbal harassment and assault⁵⁸ and in 2025, a man attending carnival festivities claimed that police stopped him from kissing another man.⁵⁹

Women's Rights

The European Institute for Gender Equality ranked Malta 13th (of 27 member states) in the EU in 2024.⁶⁰ Since 2010, Malta's score has increased by 13.4 points, one of the highest increases in the EU.⁶¹ However, a continuing level of patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes to women persist, in a traditionally religious society. A December 2024 Eurobarometer survey on gender stereotypes found that a majority in Malta think feminism has gone too far, and women should dedicate their time to family responsibilities. 75% believe women are more likely than men to make decisions based on their emotions.⁶²

A November 2024 Eurobarometer survey on violence against women⁶³ found that one in five in Malta believed that a woman is partly to blame if she suffers sexual violence while not sober, and one in three believe women fabricate or exaggerate rape claims.⁶⁴

A 2023 UN working group noted that:

"We have consistently heard from interlocutors that Malta is a conservative society with a patriarchal structure holding back women and girls from finding a genuinely equal place".⁶⁵

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is protected by the Constitution (Article 32) and also by Article 41:

(1) Except with his own consent or by way of parental discipline, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions without interference, freedom to receive ideas and information without interference, freedom to communicate ideas and information without interference.

Media Freedoms

The two major political parties, and the Roman Catholic Church, have a high level of influence on the media; in many cases, they hold at least a share of ownership in major media outlets. PBS (Public Broadcasting Services) – which operates leading broadcasting media outlets in the country – is state-owned.⁶⁶ There have also been claims of government propaganda and interference in state-controlled media.⁶⁷

In 2017, the high profile murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, an investigative journalist who had been the victim of repeated criticism for her investigations into corruption at the highest levels of government, demonstrated the extent of hostility towards dissenting media from some parts of the establishment.⁶⁸ Three men were convicted of the journalists' murder in 2021 and 2022.⁶⁹ The man suspected of ordering the murder, a prominent Maltese business man with links to the government, was charged but later released on bail at the start of 2025.⁷⁰ His trial is pending at the time of writing. The delays in the judicial proceedings have been widely criticized, including by the European Parliament,⁷¹ and the public outcry over the authorities' handling of the investigation into the murder prompted the resignation of then Prime Minister Joseph Muscat in January 2021.⁷²

In 2024, Malta was ranked 73rd, of 180, in the World Press Freedom Index,⁷³ which noted that:

"Journalists face a highly polarised environment that is heavily influenced by political parties. In 2021, the conclusions of a public inquiry into investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder listed an exhaustive list of reforms that the government has been reluctant to implement."

In December 2024, there were reports of government attempts to discredit Jacob Borg, a Times of Malta journalist investigating government scandals, with tactics similar to those allegedly used against Daphne Caruana Galizia before her murder in 2017.⁷⁴

In January 2025, discussing reform of citizens' capacity to request magisterial enquiries into alleged corruption, the prime minister said:

"There is a fake news blog, Shift News, who specialise in reporting falsehoods. 90% of what they report contain falsehoods."⁷⁵

The Shift's editor is suing the prime minister for defamation, following his comments alleging that the media organization fabricated their investigative reporting.⁷⁶

Also in January 2025, government MPs voted against amendments to the current anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) legislation, intended to prevent courts, and potential threats of a lawsuit, being used to intimidate people from exercising their freedom of expression. These amendments were proposed by MPs of the opposition Nationalist Party to ensure anti-SLAPP protections apply in Malta, rather than just transnationally.⁷⁷

Although criminal libel was abolished in 2018 in the Media and Defamation Act,⁷⁸ seen as a victory for journalism and freedom of expression, a white paper, promised by the

government in 2023, on reforms to further strengthen freedom of expression and protection for journalists, has not appeared. Recent reports suggest that some in the ruling Labour Party are calling to reinstate criminal libel, making it harder for journalists to report on government corruption.⁷⁹

In November 2024, the Education Ministry announced a new regulation requiring all educators to seek permission before speaking to the media, claiming that educators' statements should be in line with ministry policies.⁸⁰ In February 2025, a teacher was questioned by her headmaster about comments she made about the education system without prior permission.⁸¹

In February 2025, Malta received its lowest-ever score in Transparency International's Corruptions Perceptions Index, ranking 46 out of 100 – the first time it fell below the 50-point line since 2012.⁸²

"Blasphemy" Law

A 1933 law, which in effect encompassed "blasphemy," was abolished in 2016.⁸³ The Criminal Code had carried a maximum of six months imprisonment for the vilification of the Catholic religion, and three months for any other religion,⁸⁴ "by words, gestures, written matter whether printed or not, or pictures", or by giving offense by vilifying those who profess the religion, its ministers, or objects of worship.

It had been invoked actively, for example with at least 99 convictions in 2012.⁸⁵ On abolition, Archbishop of Malta Monsignor Charles Scicluna tweeted:

"A sad day for Malta. Lord forgive them: they do not know what they do".⁸⁶

However, the government has appeared to be wary of criticism of the Roman Catholic Church. For example, in 2020 the then Minister for National Heritage, Arts and Local Government claimed that a carnival float referring to clerical sex abuse, was "defamatory. . . hate speech".⁸⁷ In order to be permitted to participate in the carnival, the float owners were required to redesign it.

While some objected to censorship,⁸⁸ others agreed that the design of the float was at least in bad taste.⁸⁹

Freedom of Assembly and Association

In recent years, Malta has seen a rapid increase in civil society activism by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as Aditus, Graffiti and Repubblica. The government has no legal obligation to seek, or take into account, NGO views during the policy or law-making process, but any interest group is able to make submissions to consultative documents when they are issued.

Testimonies

"Life in Malta as a humanist can often feel like an uphill journey. Despite some progress in recent years, the pace of change remains frustratingly slow, particularly when it comes to ensuring fair and equal rights for everyone, regardless of their religion, beliefs, or gender."

"From an early age, children in Malta are heavily exposed to religious teachings, especially in schools, where religion is woven into daily life. As someone who attended a church school, I experienced first hand how this can shape—or in my case, challenge—one's world-view. It was through grappling with this environment that I realised how strongly I do not identify with the teachings of the church."

"Still, together with Humanists Malta we hold onto hope. Change may be slow, but it is happening. Living authentically as a humanist in Malta requires resilience and a willingness to challenge entrenched ideas. It's not easy, but it's worth it—for ourselves and for the future of our society."

— Mirane Vella

(On growing up humanist/non religious) "Within your extended family you have to walk on eggshells, being very careful about what you say. As a teenager growing up it all felt a little like brain-washing, but at the same time I didn't feel particularly discriminated against as I grew up. I think if I was in a much more religious part of society I would have felt it more."

— Andrew Attard Montalto

"Definitely the conservatism here is being perpetuated by Christian dogma. The church and its dogmatic views are influencing politics too much."

"Mostly we are relatively able to express ourselves freely, apart from a few ridiculous court cases (such as one journalist being charged for online threats after a clearly satirical comment; another's radio station was fined when he described a right-wing personality, previously found guilty of fomenting racial hatred and promoting racial supremacy, as "xenophobic and racist")."

— Maya Dimitrijevic

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Myanmar (Burma)

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

The northernmost country of South-East Asia, Myanmar was formerly known as Burma until 1989.¹ Occupied by the British from the early 19th Century, it gained independence in 1948. Since then the country has experienced numerous phases of conflict and instability and between 1962 and 2011 was tightly ruled by a military junta who repressed the country’s population and committed grave human rights abuses.

A gradual democratization process led the civilian National League for Democracy and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi to victory in the 2015 election. However, throughout this period the military retained significant constitutional privileges, including the control of several ministries and the right to appoint one fourth of the members of any representative assembly. In 2021, in response to a landslide election win by the National League for Democracy, the military under Min Aung Hlaing seized full control through another coup d’état.

In response to the coup d’état, millions of people across Myanmar joined in peaceful protests against the military

junta with mass demonstrations and general strikes. These were met with brutal force by the security forces with protestors detained, tortured, or killed.² Since then the country has been in a state of escalating civil conflict with millions of people displaced and thousands killed.³ Shortly after the coup d’état a parallel civilian government, the National Unity Government (NUG) was formed. It established a military wing called the People’s Defense Force (PDF) which has collaborated with local militia and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). Following an escalation in the conflict in 2023, resistance forces now control large swaths of rural areas but have so far failed to overthrow the military regime.⁴

The estimated population of Myanmar is 54.8 million.⁵ According to the 2014 Census (the latest internationally recognized census) an estimated 89.8% of the population is Buddhist, 6.3% Christian, 2.3% Muslim, 0.5% Hindu, 0.8% Animist, 0.2% other religions, and 0.1% profess no religion.⁶ The census excluded the Rohingya population from its count.⁷

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
			Expression of core Humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights is brutally repressed
		Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)	‘Blasphemy’ is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto ‘blasphemy’ laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence
Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general There is systematic religious privilege State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions	Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment	Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders	

Constitution and government

Myanmar's 2008 Constitution⁸ grants limited rights to freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of expression. However, some articles in the Constitution, as well as other laws and policies, restrict those rights. Since the 2021 coup d'état, the military junta has consistently ignored the Constitution. The ongoing state of emergency is widely regarded as unconstitutional by legal experts and Constitutional Tribunal judges were reportedly forced to resign – only to be replaced with judges appointed by the military junta.⁹

Although the country has no official state religion, Article 361 of the Constitution notes that the government “recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.” The Constitution also “recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism as the religions existing in the Union.”

The Constitution prohibits “the abuse of religion for political purposes” and members of any religious order are forbidden from running for public office or voting.¹⁰ However, the government has favored Theravada Buddhism through official propaganda and state support, including donations to monasteries and pagodas, encouragement of education at Buddhist monastic schools, and support for Buddhist missionary activities.

Religious recognition

To obtain official status, registration is required for religious organizations. The status provides religious organizations with the legal authorization to conduct their activities, as well as obtain land titles and building permits for places of worship. Operating without official registration risks a sentence of up to five years or a hefty fine of MMK 5 million (USD 1,500), or both.¹¹

Theravada Buddhist monastic orders are recognized by the government in Myanmar. The 1990 Law Relating to the Sangha Organization¹² bans any organization of Buddhist monks outside those state-recognized orders. Violations can result in criminal penalties and an immediate public defrocking.¹³

The 47 member government appointed State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (Ma Ha Na or SSMNC) oversees Buddhist affairs and religious interpretation.¹⁴ Since the establishment of the SSMNC in 1980, Buddhist monks have been tried in Sangha courts for heresy, differing interpretations of Buddhist doctrine (*adhamma*), and deviations from monastic rules (*avinaya*). These religious courts, which regulate the conduct of monastic orders, are supported by state law enforcement, with imprisonment being the penalty for non-compliance and there being no avenue for appeal.¹⁵

One such example is the case of Venerable Nyar Na who faced significant persecution for heterodox views that challenged core tenets of Theravada Buddhism, particularly concepts related to the afterlife, pre-existence, and rebirth (*samsara*). In 1983, Venerable Nyar Na adopted sky-blue robes to mark his departure from Theravada Buddhism, and to identify as a non-Theravada Buddhist. The SSMNC subsequently accused him of establishing a new Theravada sect, which authorities treated as impermissible under Myanmar's monastic regulatory framework. He was sentenced to prison several times between 1983 and 2016, serving a total of 16 years. Even after his release, his teachings, known as “Present Karma Buddhism” or “Sky-blue Buddhism,” remain heavily censored in Myanmar. In 2016, the Minister of Religious Affairs and Culture publicly banned his doctrines, stating that they radically diverged from Theravada Buddhism. His followers have also faced legal action for attempting to republish or distribute his interpretation of Buddhism.¹⁶

Religious discrimination and persecution

Most senior leadership positions in the country are held by the Buddhist and ethnic Bamar majority. This includes the major political parties, the pre-2021 civilian government, and the military. Authorities have discriminated against minority religious groups and have restricted their political and electoral rights, including through discriminatory citizenship, residency, and party registration laws.¹⁷

Access to services and proof of citizenship commonly depend on National Registration Cards (NRCs), also known as Citizenship Scrutiny Cards. These cards typically record both ethnicity and religious affiliation. While passports themselves do not display religion, applicants are often still asked to state their religion on certain official forms. Many ethnic and religious minorities face persistent barriers when trying to obtain NRCs.¹⁸

Muslims, in particular, face systematic discrimination and persecution. Authorities have been complicit in the setting up of “Muslim-free” villages and have reportedly amplified hate speech. Ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups, including the banned but very influential Ma Ba Tha, have encouraged boycotting of Muslim-run businesses and promoted anti-Muslim propaganda.¹⁹

Rohingya genocide

The persecution of Muslims in Myanmar has been most severe in the case of the Rohingya community. The Rohingya have been unable to claim citizenship since the enactment of the 1982 citizenship law²⁰ that requires one's ancestors to have lived in the country before the start of British colonial rule in 1824. As a result, Rohingya have been denied secondary and tertiary education,

and employment as civil servants. Rohingya couples have needed to obtain government permission to marry and faced restrictions on the number of children they could legally have. Authorities have also restricted their access to healthcare. A 2015 presidential decree revoked the temporary identification cards which had allowed Rohingya to vote, meaning that most Rohingya were unable to vote in the 2020 elections.²¹

In 2017, the military began its official campaign against the Rohingya in response to a series of attacks on its police stations by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in October 2016.²² However, the targeting of Rohingya civilians had already led to a refugee crisis and roughly 200,000 Rohingya refugees were living in Bangladesh at the time. The military operations across the northern part of the state led to reports of killings, torture, rape, and the burning of villages, causing another 740,000 Rohingya to flee.²³ In response to these violations, the UN set up an Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (IIFMM) whose findings established the scale and clear patterns of violations by the Myanmar military. The Mission's final report called for the investigation and prosecution of the country's top military leaders, including General Min Aung Hlaing, for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.²⁴

The military's actions continued to receive support from the democratically elected civilian government, with Aung San Suu Kyi defending it at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2019.²⁵ Despite her efforts, the ICJ ordered Myanmar to prevent genocidal acts against the Rohingya people in 2020.²⁶ Although the 2021 coup and ensuing escalation of conflict has thwarted international efforts to document ongoing violence and hold those responsible to account, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has requested an arrest warrant for Senior General Min Aung Hlaing for the crimes against humanity of deportation and persecution of the Rohingya people.²⁷

Some EAOs operating in the country are also reported to have targeted ethnic and religious minority groups in areas under their control.²⁸

Education and children's rights

Public schools in Myanmar typically begin the day with a Buddhist prayer and some schools or teachers may allow Muslim students to leave the classroom during the recitation. However, there does not appear to be a centrally mandated exemption for non-Buddhist students.²⁹

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture's Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the *Sasana* (Buddhist teaching) oversees relations between the government and Buddhist monks and schools. While religious education is not included in public schools,

there are 1,484 monastic or Dhamma schools across the country. They serve an estimated 4% of the total school-aged population. The officially registered schools follow the official school curricula but also teach Buddhist culture and ways of life.³⁰

Since the 2021 military coup d'état, Myanmar's education system has been devastated by the conflict. Attacks against schools have left many children dead or injured, sparking condemnation from other countries and the UN.³¹ The NUG and the EAOs have created a parallel education system in the areas under their control, taking over the running of thousands of schools. Their approach to education is decentralized and multi-lingual, as opposed to the junta's centralized approach which restricts the use of ethnic minority languages.³²

Family, community and society

Family law

Ethnicity and religion are closely bound in Myanmar. The period between the constitutional referendum in 2008 and the coup d'état in 2021 saw legislative efforts to marginalize non-Buddhists, despite the climate of liberalization. New legislation gained presidential assent in December 2014. A set of controversial "race and religious protection" laws have placed serious restrictions on family life.³³

Women's rights

Laws in Myanmar discriminate against women in relation to marriage, divorce, inheritance rights, custody and guardianship, and citizenship. Sexual and gender-based violence are used as war tactics and have been employed with impunity by the military as part of a strategy to intimidate, terrorize or punish civilian populations. In 2021, The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) noted that the situation of women and girls from minority groups was further marked by deeply held patriarchal attitudes in traditional culture and religious practices.³⁴

According to the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law,³⁵ Buddhist women wishing to marry non-Buddhist men must submit an application. The law requires non-Buddhist husbands to observe certain obligations and provides penalties for failing to do so.³⁶

The patriarchal and restrictive nature of contemporary Theravada Buddhism promoted by the authorities in Myanmar is seen in the treatment of Buddhist nuns. It is generally believed within the Burmese Theravada Buddhist community that the full ordination of nuns (*bhikkhuni*) can no longer take place and present nuns are now simply referred to as novice nuns (*thilashin*).³⁷ In 1998, Venerable Saccavadi, a highly accomplished *thilashin* (female renunciant) since the age of 21, was

inspired by seeing fully ordained nuns in Sri Lanka during her Buddhist literature studies. Despite being told by Burmese monks in Sri Lanka that *bhikkhuni* ordination was prohibited for women, and facing their complaint to the SSMNC, Saccavadi and another *thilashin*, Gu asārī Therī, were ordained as *bhikkhunis* in 2003. This marked the first such ordinations for Burmese women in modern times.³⁸ Upon Saccavadi's return to Myanmar in 2005 due to her father's illness, the SSMNC initiated an investigation into her *bhikkhuni* status. Subsequently, Saccavadi was charged with 'impersonating a monk' and, following her father's death, was summoned by the SSMNC. She was ultimately sentenced to five years imprisonment in Insein prison.³⁹

Population Control

Human rights advocates have criticized the 2015 Population Control Health Care Law⁴⁰ as a restrictive measure that can disproportionately affect women and religious and ethnic minorities. The law empowers authorities to require three-year spacing between births in regions considered to be experiencing rapid population growth. The legislation was reportedly advanced amid pressure from ultra-nationalist Buddhist actors in a climate of anti-Muslim sentiment.⁴¹

"Apostasy"

Under Myanmar's Religious Conversions Law,⁴² formal conversion requires township-level approval, yet the procedure is reportedly uncommon in practice because many townships do not have a Religious Board for Religious Conversion. Where boards exist, applicants must be adults and undergo a waiting period that can extend to 180 days. A certificate is granted only if the applicant still wishes to convert when the waiting period ends.⁴³

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Freedoms of association, assembly and expression had increased during the transition from military to civilian rule. The government passed a media law in 2013 that liberalized censorship laws, loosened internet restrictions, and granted rights to journalists.⁴⁴ However, legal vagueness has been a persistent problem for the implementation of such laws in practice. The 2008 Constitution grants citizens the right to "express and publish freely their convictions and opinions" in Article 354; however, it also makes these rights subject to adherence to "community peace and tranquility" and "public order and morality." This legal vagueness enables intervention by government actors. The prospect of comprehensive reforms to the legal system have collapsed since the 2021 coup d'état and the imposition of a state of emergency that has been repeatedly extended.

The military junta has complete control of the media in the country and all private broadcasters were taken off air following the coup d'état. Internet access is severely restricted and monitored, including access to social media platforms and news outlets. Some news coverage is still provided from outlets operating in hiding or from outside the country. However, the military government has been actively blocking the use of VPNs that are often used to access external content.⁴⁵ According to Reporters Without Borders:

"With significant risks of being tortured, jailed, or murdered, journalism is an extremely dangerous profession in Myanmar, which has become one of the world's biggest jailers of journalists, second only to China – and, relative to its population, by far the country that imprisons its journalists the most. The few accounts emerging from Myanmar's jails reveal extremely harsh conditions and systemic use of torture. In some cases, these abuses lead to the death of journalists, adding to the long list of those killed by the junta. Myanmar journalists are also targeted by ethnic armed organizations and anti-junta resistance forces when reporting from their regions. These groups often pressure journalists not to expose violations or negative actions, resorting to threats to suppress unfavorable coverage."⁴⁶

Freedom of Assembly and Association

Following the coup d'état, the military banned all gatherings of more than five people, put a strict curfew in place, and started using lethal and indiscriminate force against peaceful protesters. Hundreds of protesters have died and thousands have been arrested. As a result, mass protests have become much less common.⁴⁷

The right to freedom of association has also been severely restricted. A 2022 law provides a penalty of up to five years in prison for organizations that fail to register with the government. However, many civil society organizations choose not to do so as it would require them to provide substantial information to the authorities which could put individuals at risk of being targeted by the military.⁴⁸ Many NGOs have been forced to shut down since the coup d'état while others continue to operate by basing themselves at least partly outside the country.⁴⁹ Members of these organizations include some of the numerous refugees who have fled Myanmar to Thailand and India.⁵⁰

"Blasphemy" laws

Myanmar has several "blasphemy" laws including Section 295 (A) of the Penal Code,⁵¹ which prohibits:

"Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs."

Those convicted can face up to two years in prison. Additionally, Section 298 criminalizes:

“Whoever, with the deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings of any person, utters any word or makes any sound in the hearing of that person or makes any gesture in the sight of that person or places any object in the sight of that person, shall be punished~ with imprisonment of either description for a term which may be extended to one year, or with a fine or with both.”

The enforcement of these standards is highly inconsistent. “Blasphemy” laws are mainly used to protect approved forms of Buddhism and prosecute non-Buddhists but are ignored in cases of Buddhist leaders who defame other religions.⁵² Several politicians, activists and artists have received prison sentences for perceived insults to religion.⁵³

In April 2020, street artists Zayar Hnaung, Ja Sai and Naw Htun Aung were charged with “blasphemy” under provision 295 (a) of the Penal Code for a mural painted to raise awareness of the Covid-19 pandemic. The painting was alleged to be blasphemous because the artists had portrayed the grim reaper wearing a robe that had the same color as the robes Buddhist monks in Myanmar wear. One of the artists, Zayar Hnaung, a Buddhist himself, apologized on Facebook and stated that they had no intention of insulting Buddhism with the mural. The mural was later painted over.⁵⁴

In June 2020, a doctor was sentenced to 21 months in prison for insulting Buddhist monks. The court sentenced Kyaw Win Thant for violating Section 295 (a) of the Penal Code. According to reports, Thant criticized Buddhist monks on Facebook in response to the opposition of some monks to the Government’s proposal to teach sex education in school. Thant was arrested in May 2020 after hundreds of people gathered outside a monastery where Thant was present to apologize to the monks. Footage showed that the protestors were chanting “arrest him, or kill us”.⁵⁵

In August 2023, 13 Burmese nationals and a Swiss citizen, including a 12-year-old girl, were arrested and detained for their roles in creating the film “Don’t Expect Anything!” that was disseminated on the YouTube channel, *Si Dhamma*, in July of that year. The film criticized monks for not following Buddhist precepts. The junta claimed that the film contained “offensive and disrespectful language” and harmed Myanmar’s culture and Buddhist traditions. Monks opposed to the military regime defended the film arguing that Buddhism encourages critical thinking and discourages blind faith.⁵⁶

Testimony

“As an individual born into a mixed-faith household, identifying as an atheist and actively engaged in religious reformist advocacy in Myanmar, I have experienced the systemic obstacles faced by non-religious persons in the country. The process of registering a non-religious status on official documents—particularly National Identification Cards—is fraught with institutional resistance. I have faced significant complications in routine civil affairs. These barriers deter individuals such as myself from openly identifying as non-religious, reinforcing a climate of exclusion and administrative discrimination.”

– Hein Htet Kyaw

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Sudan

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Sudan, once the largest country in Africa, has long suffered from severe ethnic strife and been plagued by internal conflict. The country gained independence from British-Egyptian rule in 1956. Wars between the predominantly Christian and animist south and the predominantly Muslim north eventually culminated in South Sudan's independence in 2011.¹

Sudan's long civil wars have given the country a poor human rights record and have led to large numbers of internal displacements within the country. The 2003-2020 war in the Darfur region saw the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebel groups fighting government forces. It was followed by a government campaign of ethnic cleansing against Darfur's non-Arab communities resulting in the deaths of an estimated 300,000 people.²

At the time of writing, the country is caught up in another civil war between rival factions resulting in a devastating

humanitarian crisis, and severe political and economic instability. As of early January 2026, the Sudan portal of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported 11.75 million people forcibly displaced since the conflict began in 2023 - including over seven million internally displaced.³ United Nations (UN) agencies estimate around 34 million are in need of humanitarian assistance while more than 21 million people are acutely food insecure.⁴

Sudan's population is predominantly Sunni Muslim. The Pew Research Center estimates that Muslims account for roughly 90% of the population and Christians make up around 5%. Followers of indigenous religions account for roughly 3%, with a small remainder made up of other faiths and religiously unaffiliated individuals.⁵ There is no specific indication of the number of non-religious people living in the country. Sudan is a member of the League of Arab States (LAS), as well as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
State legislation is largely derived from religious law or by religious authorities		Government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious	Expression of core Humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights is brutally repressed
	Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative	It is illegal to register an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization, or such groups are persecuted by authorities	
		The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism	'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto 'blasphemy' laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence
		Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination	

Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views

Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)

Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters

Constitution and government

Political situation

President Omar al-Bashir, who came to power through a military coup d'état in 1989, was ousted in 2019 following months of civilian protests against his rule.⁶ He was convicted of corruption charges by a Sudanese court and is wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to stand trial for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes over Sudan's military campaign in Darfur. In September 2024, due to his health deterioration, al-Bashir was transferred to a medical facility in northern Sudan after being held in a military facility since the war broke out in April 2023.⁷

After the overthrow of former president al-Bashir, Sudan embarked on a political transition aimed at dismantling some of the hardline Islamist policies through democratic civilian rule.⁸ As part of a power-sharing deal between the ruling Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the opposition Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) coalition, an 11-member sovereign council composed of six civilians and five military officers was appointed to govern the country for a three-year transition period (until 2022).⁹ However, in October 2021, the commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, seized power, dissolving the transitional government and arresting civilian leaders. The move led to nationwide protests and international condemnation.¹⁰ In April 2023, fighting erupted between the SAF and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), notorious for their role in the ethnic cleansing of non-Arab civilians in Darfur. The fighting between the two factions resulted in mass killing and reports of ethnic-based atrocities.¹¹

As of January 2026, Sudan remains embroiled in civil war, with mass displacement continuing and famine conditions reported in multiple locations. The SAF, under Gen. al-Burhan, has retaken key positions in Khartoum (including the Presidential Palace in March 2025) and fierce fighting continues despite the resumption of peace talks in January 2026 and calls for a nationwide humanitarian truce.¹²

Progress stalled

After al-Bashir was ousted, Abdalla Hamdok was sworn in as prime minister in August 2019 and became the head of the transitional government. During this period, the transitional authorities began dismantling key elements of the former Islamist legal framework. A raft of legal amendments were passed in July 2020 in order to bring the country's laws in line with a 2019 interim constitutional declaration. These included amendments to abolish the crime of "apostasy";¹³ to end the death penalty and flogging for same-sex relationships (but keeping a possible sentence of prison terms ranging from five years to life);¹⁴ to permit children to travel with their mothers without permission from male members of their family; to ban female genital mutilation (FGM); to repeal some laws restricting women's dress; and to allow consumption of alcohol for non-Muslims.¹⁵

These reforms rested on the interim constitutional declaration signed by the TMC and the FFC (the "2019 Declaration").¹⁶ The 2019 Declaration contains provisions protecting the right to freedom of religion or belief (framed in the text as operating "in accordance with the requirements of the law and public order"). It repeals the Transitional Constitution of 2005 and the constitutions of all Sudanese provinces.¹⁷ However, laws promulgated pursuant to the 2005 Constitution will remain in effect until such time as they are abolished or new laws are passed repealing them.

The reform agenda proved politically polarizing. While many in Sudan celebrated the changes, loyalists of al-Bashir and Sudan's Islamic parties, including the Popular Congress Party (PCP), denounced them. The famous Sudanese cleric Abdul Hai Youssef called for "jihad" against Prime Minister Hamdok's government, stating that "bringing down this government, which has legalized "apostasy" and other wrongdoings, is a duty for any Muslim."¹⁸ In March 2020, an unsuccessful assassination attempt was carried out against Prime Minister Hamdok, who was widely seen to be leading the reforms.¹⁹ In September 2020, the transitional government signed a declaration adopting the principle of secularism, stating that:

“[f]or Sudan to become a democratic country where the rights of all citizens are enshrined, the constitution should be based on the principle of ‘separation of religion and state,’ in the absence of which the right to self-determination must be respected.”²⁰

Progress stalled following the October 2021 coup d’état led by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, which placed Sudan under military control and limited civilian governance. Although Prime Minister Hamdok was reinstated in November of the same year, he resigned in January 2022.²¹ A Framework Political Agreement drafted at the end of 2022 reiterated a pledge to protect freedom of religion and belief, but subsequent instability – and then war – left many reforms and commitments unimplemented.²²

In May 2025, Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan appointed Kamil Idris as prime minister, the first since the civil war began. Prime Minister Idris was tasked with forming a new transitional government.²³ International observers, including the UN Secretary-General, expressed hope that the appointment of a civilian prime minister could be a first step toward peace.²⁴

In February 2025, the RSF and allied political and armed groups signed a charter for the creation of a parallel government which called for a secular, decentralized Sudan and a ban on religious political parties. In late July 2025, the parallel government was announced, raising fears of further partition within the country.²⁵

Registration of religious groups

Formal recognition of religious groups is primarily overseen by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA). The MRA also plays a wider administrative role in religious affairs, including oversight of Islamic institutions and engagement with churches and other communities.²⁶

A religious group’s ability to run humanitarian assistance programs often depends on registration with the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC). Registration can determine access to benefits such as tax exemptions and ownership of land.²⁷

Education and children’s rights

All schools in Sudan are required to provide Islamic education classes to Muslim students as part of the national curriculum, and attendance is mandatory for those students. Non-Muslim students are formally exempt from Islamic education classes.²⁸ However, in practice, implementation varies and there have been reports that some Christian students have been required to attend Islamic classes. As all students must receive religious education, students of minority religions are typically educated outside the formal school setting, and there are no secular alternatives that allow students to opt out of religious instruction altogether. Christian instruction in public schools should be available when there are at least 15 Christian students in a class,²⁹ and

the government had planned to increase the number of Christian teachers before the proposal was disrupted by the 2021 coup d’état and the ensuing conflict.³⁰

In January 2020, the Ministry of Education had also announced that pre-school students would no longer be required to learn the Quran in school.³¹ The transitional government also suspended a law that required Christian schools to conduct classes on Sundays.³²

Given the current political instability in the country, it is unclear how far the letter of the law is applied in practice.

Child Marriage

Sudan’s 1991 Muslim Personal Status Act³³ permits marriage for girls as young as ten, and child marriage remains widespread.³⁴ It is estimated that a third of the female population between 20-24 is married before the age of 18.³⁵ A report published by UNICEF in 2017, found that many religious leaders believe that child marriage is part of Islamic principles and are therefore resistant to change. However, the report also points to examples of receptive religious leaders in the country, including a religious scholar who calculated that the Prophet Mohammed married his wife when she was 17 or 18 years old, and not nine years old as is frequently claimed.³⁶

Family, community and society

The Criminal Code³⁷ states that the law shall be based on Sharia sources and include *hudud*, *qisas*, and *diyah* principles (regarding punishment, restitution, and compensation for specific serious crimes). Many laws concerning personal and family matters adopted during the al-Bashir administration remain largely in effect and continue to be based on Sharia law. Interpretation of Sharia-based law draws on various schools of jurisprudence (*madhahib*). A Panel of Islamic Scholars and Preachers (the *Fiqh* Council) has been responsible for explaining and interpreting the laws and indicating which approaches may be applied in practice. Since the ousting of al-Bashir, the scope of the *Fiqh* Council’s mandate has remained uncertain.³⁸

Discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities

Under al-Bashir’s government, Christians in Sudan were persecuted and churches were forcibly shut down or destroyed, often under the pretext that they lacked proper building permits.³⁹ In November 2025, two Christian churches in the city of Port Sudan were graffitied with Islamic phrases written in red paint. They were among the oldest churches in the country and, despite being located opposite a police station and the perpetrators being caught on CCTV, the police took no action.⁴⁰

In September 2019, Prime Minister Hamdok stated that his administration would address “religious discrimination,” and the Minister of Religion invited Jews and Christians who had left the country to return. However, religious discrimination remains prevalent in Sudan, as many laws concerning personal and family affairs adopted during al-Bashir’s rule largely remain in effect. This can result in different legal outcomes depending on the perpetrator’s religion. For example, while Muslim men are allowed to marry Christian or Jewish women, Muslim women generally may not marry a non-Muslim man. Differences have also been reported in how certain offenses are enforced – for instance, alcohol-related penalties have not always been applied uniformly across religious groups. The Criminal Code sets out that Muslims that possess or consume alcohol are subject to lashes as punishment, while non-Muslims are typically not. The law also provides a discretionary mechanism for early release if an inmate memorizes the Quran during imprisonment.⁴¹

In December 2019, the transitional government declared Christmas a national holiday, and court proceedings were initiated to return land confiscated by the previous regime back to Christian communities.⁴²

Despite the 2020 agreements, and even before war broke out in 2023, incidents of ethnic violence across the country were rife. Hundreds of people died and hundreds of thousands were displaced during conflicts between tribes in the Blue Nile, Kordofan, and Darfur areas. Government responses sometimes worsened the humanitarian situation, with arbitrary detentions and abductions by security forces.⁴³

According to Freedom House:

“Since the start of the 2023 war, the RSF and allied militias have carried out brutal attacks on non-Arab populations in Darfur, particularly the Massalit, in an attempt to expel those groups from certain areas, such as the city of El-Geneina. Reports indicated that more than 10,000 people had been killed by late 2023, while hundreds of thousands fled the region. Sexual violence against women and girls in Darfur was pervasive. The RSF also reportedly burned neighborhoods, health clinics, and humanitarian aid offices, preventing survivors of the attacks from accessing help. Violence against civilians based on their ethnic origin intensified in October, when the RSF started gaining more territory in the region, and continued through year’s end.”⁴⁴

Since the current civil war began, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has documented a deterioration in conditions for religious minorities, including reports of arbitrary detention and incidents involving attacks on places of worship.⁴⁵ The impact of the war on places of worship has not been confined to one religious group. The UN’s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan found that there have

been a series of attacks on religious sites, including the bombing of churches and mosques. In September 2025, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) carried out a drone strike on the Al-Safiya Mosque in north Darfur killing at least 75 worshippers during morning prayers.⁴⁶

There is little information available on the experience of atheists in Sudan, however some accounts describe severe social stigma and threats of violent attack.⁴⁷ This would be consistent with violence faced by other minority belief groups detailed above.

Women’s Rights

Women were fundamental to the protests that contributed to the 2019 ousting of former President al-Bashir whose regime had severely suppressed women’s rights.⁴⁸ The current conflict has, however, halted the progress that was starting to be seen in a country where leaders have long used religious laws to exert control over women.⁴⁹ In what is an extremely patriarchal society, women are again the victims of further waves of violence and brutality including extremely high levels of sexual violence and exploitation.⁵⁰

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Despite Sudan’s legal ban on FGM in 2020, women and girls remain highly vulnerable to the practice, and even more so in the context of conflict, displacement and humanitarian crisis.⁵¹

According to the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), almost 89% of women in Sudan have undergone FGM, although support for the practice is slowly starting to decline. Reasons given by women to justify the continuation of the practice were, “cleanliness (purity), social acceptance, better marriage prospects, chastity, and sexual attraction to male partners”.⁵²

Religious leaders have shown a varied response to initiatives seeking to abolish the practice. A report from the Women’s Studies International Forum publication argues that gaining support from religious leaders on this issue has depended on the composition of their power base and their inclusion in or exclusion from the process.⁵³

LGBTI+ Rights

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Sudan and currently carries a penalty of five years imprisonment, which can extend to life imprisonment in the case of a third conviction. The possibility of capital or corporal punishment was removed when the Penal Code was amended in 2020.⁵⁴

LGBTI+ individuals face serious threats of harassment or attack in a highly conservative and religious society that remains overwhelmingly opposed to LGBTI+ rights.⁵⁵

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Media freedoms

Media freedoms were heavily restricted during al-Bashir's rule, characterized by institutionalized censorship, mass arrests of journalists, and raids on newspapers and printing presses. While there were improvements under the new 2019 government, Reporters Without Borders reported that, while the government had committed to freedom of expression, censorship was exercised more discreetly. Most political newspapers continue to be affiliated with supporters of the former regime.⁵⁶

A number of laws have been used to target and silence critics and independent media. The Press and Publications Act 2009⁵⁷ and the National Security Act 2010⁵⁸ remain in effect, while the draconian Cybercrime Act 2007⁵⁹ has been replaced with the vaguely worded Law on Combating Cybercrimes (LCC) 2018,⁶⁰ which rights groups describe as vague and repressive.⁶¹ In January 2026, Sudanese activist Ayman Hariri was handed a fine of two million Sudanese pounds and sentenced to six months in prison under Sudan's cybercrimes law. On social media, he had criticized the security services' use of a building that had previously been used to provide emergency care and shelter to those displaced by the conflict.⁶² Reporters Without Borders found that the 2021 military coup d'état reinstated censorship and, since the start of the 2023 conflict, attacks on journalists have surged, forcing many to flee abroad.⁶³

Today, state-controlled media dominates Sudan's information landscape, typically serving as mouthpieces for the government. Since the 2021 coup d'état, repression has intensified with journalist arrests, internet shutdowns, and military propaganda. The civil war has further crippled the media, forcing many outlets to close.⁶⁴ Communications – and particularly internet access – has frequently been affected during the conflict, with disruptions impacting the ability of emergency services to operate and humanitarian organizations to provide relief. Interviews with human rights defenders by Amnesty International revealed that they were “unable to carry out meaningful documentation of rights violations” due to internet blackouts.⁶⁵

Sudan's multicultural society faces growing intolerance, with rising ethnic tensions and media scrutiny. Religious groups influence journalism, while social media – once a platform for free expression – now fuels racism and misogyny, often targeting women and minorities. Journalists in Sudan face growing threats of arrest and torture from militias, the army, and the RSF. Women journalists are the most targeted.⁶⁶

“Apostasy” and “blasphemy”

During al-Bashir's reign there were many high-profile cases of “apostasy.”⁶⁷ In July 2020, “apostasy” was decriminalized, and replaced by a new provision prohibiting the labeling of any group of individuals as “infidels.”⁶⁸

In July 2022, four Christian men in Darfur were accused of “apostasy” following a church raid, even though the law against converting from Islam had been abolished.⁶⁹ After reportedly being subjected to police harassment and inhumane and degrading treatment, as well as a legal ordeal, the General Prosecutor in Central Darfur dismissed the case in September of the same year.⁷⁰

“Blasphemy” remains a criminal offense; however, the provision has been amended. Prior to the amendment, Article 125 of the Penal Code stated:

“Whoever, by any means, publicly abuses or insults any of the religions, rites, or beliefs, or sanctities, or seeks to excite feelings of contempt and disrespect against the believers thereof, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year, or with a fine, or with whipping, which may not exceed forty lashes.”⁷¹

The new law abolishes the penalty of whipping, and the period of imprisonment is limited to six months.⁷² In November 2024, reports indicated that many Christians were still serving long jail terms related to “blasphemy” charges, despite the 2020 legal changes.⁷³

Freedom of Assembly

After 2019, the transitional government eased restrictions on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) making it possible for them to register. In light of the ongoing conflict and subsequent obstacles to registration faced by many NGOs, the Humanitarian Aid Commission issued a decree that extended the validity of expired registrations to March 2024.⁷⁴ Reports indicate that there has been an increasing level of attacks on human rights groups and women human rights defenders in particular since the start of the current hostilities.⁷⁵

Anti-government protests, which began in December 2018, were violently suppressed by state security forces, who attacked protesters wherever they congregated, including outside mosques, hospitals, and schools. Serious violations reported during the protests include the use of torture and other inhuman, degrading treatment; sexual and gender-based violence; and attempts by the state to limit information about events on the ground by shutting down the internet and communications networks.⁷⁶

While the transitional government committed to holding those responsible for the violence to account, it failed to release the findings from its investigation and bring charges against officials. Human Rights Watch found that at least 120 people had been killed and more than 900 injured between 3-18 June 2019, while Sudanese officials estimated that at least 64 women were raped and others sexually assaulted.⁷⁷

In 2022, security forces violently suppressed protests, killing and injuring protesters, and blocking roads and bridges to prevent gatherings in key locations.⁷⁸ Throughout 2023, the Sudanese government, SAF, RSF, and allied militias were responsible for numerous extrajudicial killings. In February, security forces killed a 16-year-old protester with a police officer indicted for murder.⁷⁹

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The United States of America (U.S.) is a large country of around 340 million people, bordered by Canada to the north and Mexico to the south. It comprises 50 states that operate somewhat autonomously under the authority of the nation's federal government.

Before European colonization, it is thought that roughly 1.5 million Native American people inhabited what is now the continental United States. In 1565, the first permanent European settlement was founded. During the 17th and 18th centuries hundreds of thousands of Africans were brought across and sold into slavery to work on cotton and tobacco plantations. British rule was eventually defeated in 1783, and in 1787 the Founding Fathers drew up a new Constitution for the nation. The 19th century brought mass immigration from Europe

with settlers moving westwards, crushing the resistance of the indigenous peoples. The 1861-1865 Civil War saw Federal forces defeat the Confederate pro-slavery states in the south bringing about the abolishment of slavery.¹

Since the end of World War II, the U.S. has been widely considered the most powerful nation on earth and remains the most influential player in global economic, cultural, and political affairs.

The U.S. Census does not cover religious affiliation, however the Pew Research Center, which conducts regular surveys, estimates that Christians currently account for between 60-64% of the population, while the non-religious represent between 28-31%. Other religions consistently account for 6-7% of the overall population.²

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<p>There is systematic religious privilege</p> <p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p> <p>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</p>	<p>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</p> <p>Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment</p> <p>Some concerns about children's right to specifically freedom of religion or belief</p>	<p>Use of Conscientious Objection clauses resulting in the denial of lawful services to women and LGBTI+ people</p> <p>Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders</p> <p>Religious groups control some public or social services</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is somewhat restricted</p>
<p>Official symbolic deference to religion</p> <p>Anomalous discrimination by local or provincial authorities, or overseas territories</p>		<p>Localized or infrequent but recurring and widespread social marginalization or prejudice against the non-religious</p>	<p>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</p>

Constitution and government

The U.S. has historically received a relatively good rating in the Freedom of Thought report as a consequence of the nation's strong constitutional protections in favor of freedom of thought, religion or belief, and freedom of expression, which have usually been upheld in practice. There is also a deep-rooted cultural emphasis on individual freedom.

The nation's foundational freedoms, including the openness to challenge and debate, are in constant tension with the religious nationalist ideals of some citizens and government officials. Consequently, secular, humanist, and civil liberties organizations are engaged in a perpetual struggle to defend the Constitution's inherent secularism. This conflict often arises when state authorities or individuals invoke "religious freedom" to bypass the separation of church and state, or to establish a particular religious belief in the public sphere.

The Constitution: "Establishment" and "Free Exercise"

The U.S. Constitution is often considered one of the world's first secular political documents. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects the right to freedom of religion and freedom of expression from government interference:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."³

This amendment has two clauses directly relating to the relationship between state and religion. The "Establishment Clause" forbids the establishment of a state church and prevents the government, both state and federal, from favoring any one religious doctrine. This is often called the "Separation Clause", referring to Thomas Jefferson's description of "a wall of separation between church and state." The "Free Exercise Clause" protects the right to hold whatever religious beliefs an individual wants and to exercise those beliefs.⁴

Together, these clauses historically established a largely open society in which all people retain the same legal rights to practice religion or not; to convert from one religion to another; to express beliefs regarding religion; and to participate in all areas of public life. However, recent legal precedent at both the state and federal levels increasingly interprets the "Free Exercise" clause as superseding the "Establishment Clause."⁵ A growing number of government officials extend their understanding of religious freedom to include a right to

shape laws or social norms according to their religious doctrines, even at the cost of others' dignity and autonomy, leading to discrimination against those of different beliefs. This trend is illustrated by a series of pivotal court cases focusing on the concept of a "religious license to discriminate."⁶

Since 2020, several Supreme Court case decisions have made it increasingly difficult for individuals to challenge religious discrimination through the courts. In *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* (2021), the Court ruled that the city violated the "Free Exercise Clause" by refusing to engage in a contract with the Catholic Social Services (CSS) unless it agreed to certify same-sex couples as foster parents.⁷ In *303 Creative LLC v. Elenis* (2023), the U.S. Supreme Court held that a web designer had a First Amendment right to refuse to create websites for same-sex weddings, citing religious objections. This ruling established a precedent that businesses engaged in "expressive conduct" are exempt from generally applicable public accommodation laws if they claim that compliance would violate their beliefs.⁸ And in *Mahmoud v. Taylor* (2025), the Court ruled that denying parents opt-outs from LGBTI-inclusive curricula violated the "Free Exercise Clause."⁹ The decision granted parents a legal basis to remove or block specific classroom content due to their personal religious objections.

The Court's decisions have created a legal paradox where attempts to maintain the separation of church and state through the "Establishment Clause" are now sometimes viewed as an attack on individuals' rights to freely exercise their religion. This dynamic highlights how the "Free Exercise Clause," intended to protect religious freedom, can hinder religious freedom for those who do not share particular dominant beliefs.

Trump's Second Presidency

In his second term, U.S. President Donald Trump has further deepened his alliance with conservative Christian leaders. He has elevated influential, non-denominational evangelical Christian leaders whose beliefs were previously on the fringes, but are now accepted as mainstream. This partnership is visible in policy-making and appointments, reflecting an agenda to reshape the role of religion in American public life.

Since President Trump's return to office, the U.S. has taken steps to withdraw from multilateral forums. In February 2025, an order was given to disengage from the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council and review, or cut, funding to UN entities. The Trump administration officially boycotted the UN Universal Periodic Review of the United States in November 2025, marking the first time in the history of the UPR process that a member state declined to participate in its own evaluation. It has also been announced that the U.S. will leave the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2026.

Project 2025

Project 2025, a comprehensive blueprint developed by the Heritage Foundation and a coalition of other far-right conservative organizations, serves as a roadmap for the current administration. The document aims to reshape the U.S. government by aligning federal policy with “biblical principles” and prioritizing faith-based social programs while reducing secular oversight. It also recommends allowing religious convictions to override civil rights protections in health care, employment, and housing.¹⁰ Project 2025’s efforts to dismantle the separation of church and state align with the goals of a Christian theocracy. Project 2025 Tracker showed that, as of August 12, 2025, 47% of its proposals had been enacted within only the first several months of the administration, a testament to its influence in advancing a far-right Christian nationalist agenda.¹¹

Department of Justice and Related Initiatives

The Department of Justice under Trump’s second term is playing a key role in advancing the administration’s “religious freedom” agenda. In February 2025, President Trump established the “Anti-Christian Bias Task Force,” led by Attorney General Pamela Bondi. The task force is charged with investigating and eradicating “anti-Christian targeting and discrimination” within federal government agencies, with a stated aim to “fully prosecute anti-Christian violence and vandalism.”¹²

Furthermore, in May 2025, President Trump established the “Religious Liberty Commission.” The commission, composed of religious and political figures, is tasked with safeguarding and promoting religious freedom, advising the White House Faith Office, and recommending executive or legislative actions.¹³ While purporting to protect religious liberty for all, concerns persist among civil liberties groups that it will create a “hierarchy of rights” that devalues or ignores certain human rights, particularly those pertaining to women and LGBTI+ individuals, under the guise of religious freedom.¹⁴

Cabinet and Public Discourse

The current U.S. administration’s daily practices signal their overt alignment with religious ideology. President Trump’s cabinet opens meetings with Christian prayers.¹⁵ This public display of religious observance, coupled with rhetoric from figures like the Vice President J.D. Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, promotes a Christian nationalist perspective, implying that non-believers are a threat to traditional moral order.¹⁶

Legislative and Regulatory Efforts

A broader effort is underway to reshape legal and regulatory frameworks. One key target is the Johnson Amendment, a provision in the U.S. tax code restricting

religious bodies from engaging in partisan political activities. The administration aims to allow tax-exempt religious organizations, including mega-churches, to engage in partisan activity without risking their tax status.¹⁷ The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) recently stated this position in federal court.¹⁸ While proponents argue this protects religious leaders’ free speech, there are concerns this would flood American politics with unchecked religious money and influence, fundamentally altering church-state separation.¹⁹ At the time of writing, this case is unresolved.

Symbolic Actions and Broader Implications

President Trump’s continued use of religious imagery in political contexts, reminiscent of his holding up a Bible during anti-racism protests in his first term, further illustrates his administration’s consistent embrace of Christian nationalist messaging. His declarations, such as those made at the UN Global Call to Protect Religious Freedom event, often emphasize protection for ‘people of all faiths,’ but conspicuously omit humanists or the non-religious, signaling religious favoritism that alarms U.S. secular and civil liberties groups.²⁰

Religious Displays on Government Property

The U.S. Constitution prohibits the government from endorsing one religion over another, but efforts to promote religion, and particularly Christianity, often appear through religious displays and monuments on public property.

The phrase “In God We Trust” originated in the mid-1800s, but gained political prominence a century later during the Cold War. In 1956, Congress passed a joint resolution declaring “In God We Trust” to be the national motto to differentiate the U.S. from “godless Communists,” implying that non-religious Americans were untrustworthy and aligned with the enemy.²¹

The current administration champions phrases like “One Nation Under God” and “In God We Trust,” defending their inclusion in official contexts and advocating for their wider use as an acknowledgement of “history” and “tradition” while ignoring their more recent origins. These efforts serve as a symbolic representation of the administration’s broader agenda. While legal challenges from secular and religious minority groups persist, the administration’s vocal support elevates religious messaging as integral to national identity, further blurring the lines between church and state.

Although being non-religious is less stigmatized than it was in the past, there is still a widespread assumption that to be American is to be Christian.²² This religiopolitical conflation has been used by Christian nationalists to marginalize non-religious and non-Christian Americans by promoting religious displays and monuments both on public land and in government buildings.²³

The U.S. is not, however, a Christian nation. The First Amendment requires strict separation of religion and government, reflecting the founders' understanding of America's pluralism even in the 18th century.²⁴ Religious displays on government property stigmatize non-Christians and otherize the non-religious.²⁵ Additionally, such displays embolden adherents who view these displays as a government license to harass and isolate others, without fear of recourse.²⁶

The holiday season often produces "Establishment Clause" violations regarding religious displays by local governments placing stand-alone nativity scenes (creches) on public grounds. However, local governments have found a way around the law by allowing other religious holiday displays along with the nativity scenes, such as menorahs.²⁷ A number of local secular organizations have requested permission to erect displays representing humanists, atheists, and freethinkers with varying levels of success.

Religious Oaths for Office

Although the U.S. Constitution states "no religious Tests shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States,"²⁸ the provision has not always applied to state-level offices.²⁹ Consequently, several state constitutions still include provisions requiring public office holders to swear a religious oath or practice a certain religion or denomination. Others explicitly prohibit atheists and non-religious people from holding public office.³⁰ After the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Torcaso v. Watkins* (1961) struck down Maryland's requirement that officials profess a belief in God, such provisions became unenforceable.³¹ However, many state constitutions still contain this unconstitutional language, perpetuating stigma against atheists, agnostics, humanists, and other non-religious people.³² Should the Supreme Court ever overturn *Torcaso*, these provisions could once again bar atheists from elected office.

State Level Religious Freedom Restoration Acts (RFRA)

Congress passed the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) in 1993,³³ and 30 states have since created their own version of this law through legislation or court decisions.³⁴ RFRA requires the government to meet a rigid legal test called "strict scrutiny" when any action burdens religious expression. Under this test, any law that affects a fundamental right, such as religious freedom, is presumed to be invalid unless the government can prove there was no other option but to impose the burden to achieve a compelling state interest.

Although strict scrutiny theoretically allows regulation under narrow conditions, RFRA operates in practice as broad religious exemptions that can be used to evade enforcement of nearly any law that burdens religious

practice, no matter how remote the burden.³⁵ Over the past several decades, RFRA has enabled challenges to non-discrimination laws, child labor and protection laws, and employment laws.³⁶ They have also served as a foundation for employers to refuse to provide basic health care coverage to employees and force the government to provide taxpayer funds to discriminatory organizations who would otherwise not be eligible for funding.

"Yes in God's Backyard"

The U.S. faces a severe shortage of affordable housing. One of the ways states have responded is by reforming local zoning laws to expand affordable housing and reduce the housing burden for low- and middle-income families. One type of zoning law that is gaining popularity is known as "Yes In God's Backyard" (YIGBY). This law allows religious organizations to build and operate low-income housing developments.³⁷ The religious organizations eligible under YIGBY are often exempt from state and federal housing non-discrimination laws.³⁸ Consequently, state governments that enact YIGBY laws transfer their responsibilities regarding the welfare of citizens to private organizations that are legally permitted to discriminate against prospective tenants based on religious belief.

Religious Resolutions

Resolutions are declarations issued by lawmakers which, while lacking legal force, express the legislature's opinion regarding a particular issue.³⁹ Religious resolutions, such as Oklahoma's "Christ is King"⁴⁰ and Indiana's "Recognizing the Importance of Repentance,"⁴¹ endorse one religious perspective over all other forms of religious and non-religious belief. Although such resolutions rarely pass, they undermine foundational principles of religious freedom and constitute an abuse of public office, relegating the vast majority of a state's citizens to second-class status because their beliefs are considered disfavored.⁴²

Education and children's rights

The role of religion in U.S. public schools continues to be a source of heated debate, a tension that has escalated over decades. Following his re-election, President Trump appointed Linda McMahon as Secretary of Education,⁴³ signaling continued support for school privatization and other policies criticized for undermining public education.

The change is not just a bureaucratic shift; it represents a fundamental reshaping of U.S. education that directly impacts freedom of thought. By systematically dismantling secular, federal services, the government creates space for religious organizations to step in and replace them. Religious entities are now positioned to receive significant public funding to provide education and social services while being shielded from government oversight.

School vouchers, education savings accounts, and tax credit scholarship programs pose a growing threat by diverting public funds from public, locally funded schools to private, mostly religious schools. These institutions, which are not held to the same accountability standards as public schools, often discriminate against staff, students, and families.

Several states have enacted universal private school voucher programs, providing significant taxpayer funds for private school tuition. At the federal level, the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” created the nation’s first federally funded voucher program by offering billions in federal tax credits for private school scholarships. The Secretary of Education strongly supports school voucher programs and policies that divert taxpayer funds from public schools to private institutions, 77% of which are religious schools.⁴⁴

Some recently enacted laws allow the state to directly provide millions of taxpayer dollars to religious schools, undermining the longstanding U.S. principle that religion and government must remain separate.

Religious nationalist groups have increasingly targeted public education, seeking to reshape instruction to align with religious dogma. In recent years, far-right religious groups have sought to influence social studies, health education, and history instruction. Several states have enacted legislation requiring educators to incorporate religious doctrine into otherwise secular lessons. Religious lobbying groups have also advocated for “Released Time for Religious Instruction” policies, which permit students to receive faith-based instruction from religious organizations off-campus during the school day.

School prayer has remained a contested issue, with increasing legislative efforts to introduce religious observance into public school settings. Students generally retain the right to pray individually or in groups, independent of formal school proceedings, as long as it is not disruptive, and expressions of religion are protected under the “Free Exercise Clause.” But recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings and laws have pushed beyond prior prohibitions on official school prayer.

Supreme Court Rulings on Religion in Public Schools

The current conservative majority in the U.S. Supreme Court has signaled an openness to overturning legal precedents to favor religious belief over secular governance. Since the *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022) decision, in which the Court ruled that prayer in a public school environment can be protected speech under the First Amendment under certain circumstances, 25 states have introduced or passed legislation requiring public schools to display the Ten Commandments, “In God We Trust,” or to designate times for prayer. In 2025, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas passed laws mandating the display of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms.

In *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey-Berru* (2020), the Supreme Court expanded the “ministerial exception” to antidiscrimination laws. It held that courts cannot intervene in employment disputes at religious schools when employees perform “vital religious duties,” such as leading students in prayer or religious instruction.⁴⁵ By defining a wider range of school workers, like teachers, as “ministers,” the Court has created a broad and dangerous loophole that allows religious employers to discriminate against employees with no judicial recourse. Religious schools can easily exploit this loophole by labeling any of their employees “religious leaders.”⁴⁶

Government funding of religious schools has also expanded. In *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* (2020), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled states cannot exclude religious schools from generally available scholarship programs. Similarly, in *Carson v. Makin* (2022), the Supreme Court ruled that a Maine tuition assistance program – that excluded religious schools because they provided religious instruction – violated the “Free Exercise Clause.”⁴⁷

Mahmoud v. Taylor (2025) is a landmark case for children’s rights and secular education. In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court addressed whether public schools violated parents’ “Free Exercise” rights by not allowing opt-outs from curriculum involving LGBTI-themed materials. The Court sided with the parents, finding that mandatory exposure to inclusive content without an opt-out option burdened the parent’s rights to direct their children’s upbringing.⁴⁸ The decision effectively granted religious parents veto power over inclusive curricula, signaling that LGBTI+ students and families are unworthy of recognition, and allowing a small minority of parents with extreme viewpoints to dictate what all students may learn, regardless of other families’ beliefs.⁴⁹ More than half the states have passed laws allowing parents to censor instructional materials or topics, with 75% of these laws being enacted within just the past decade.

Together, these court decisions reveal a consistent pattern of the U.S. judicial branch expanding religious rights in educational settings while weakening protections for freedom of thought. These rulings weaken the wall of separation between church and state, undermine civil rights protections, and create a legal environment where religious institutions and individuals have increasing influence over public and private education.

Child Marriage

Marriage age in the U.S. is set by state. 16 out of 50 states have recently set the minimum age at 18 without exceptions, but the majority of states provide exceptions that allow young people to marry with parental consent or judicial approval at 16 or 17 (15 in Hawaii and Mississippi). Four states – California, Mississippi, New Mexico and Oklahoma – do not specify any minimum age at all.⁵⁰

Religious and cultural factors constitute the primary obstacles to enacting permanent and comprehensive bans on child marriage. When young people experience teenage pregnancy, parents are often pressured by religious teachings that emphasize marriage as the only “acceptable” response to pregnancy outside wedlock, leading them to coerce their children into unwanted marriages.⁵¹ Economic pressures also contribute to early marriage. Families experiencing economic hardship may pressure minors into marriage under traditional religious or cultural beliefs about family structure and gender roles.⁵²

Family, community, and society

Shifting Demographics vs. Persistent Prejudice

The U.S. is undergoing a significant shift in religious demographics, marked by a rise in the number of religiously unaffiliated individuals, often referred to as “Nones.” This group now constitutes roughly 28% of the U.S. population.⁵³ Despite this growth, non-religious Americans still face stigma, with surveys historically indicating that many view atheists as a threat to traditional morality. However, data from the Center for Freethought Equality (CFE) suggests this sentiment may be waning in the political sphere and that identifying as an atheist will no longer definitively cause a candidate to lose an electoral campaign.⁵⁴ In institutional settings like prisons, the military, and government-funded social services, the free exercise rights of non-religious individuals face significant challenges. These environments often prioritize or assume religious practice, which can marginalize or directly infringe upon the rights of those who are not religious.

Religious Interference with Health Care and Family

The U.S. health care landscape is being reshaped by legal and political actions that expand the role of religious exemptions in medical care for medical practitioners, patients, employers, and insurers. The precedent for this shift was established by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* (2014), which allowed for-profit corporations to claim religious exemptions from the “Affordable Care Act’s” mandate to cover contraception.⁵⁵ This ruling set the stage for a broader push by religious organizations and businesses to claim similar exemptions, increasingly limiting patients’ access to a wide range of services, including reproductive and gender-affirming care.⁵⁶

The 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade* and eliminated the constitutional right to abortion, galvanizing religious arguments to restrict abortion access. States quickly implemented bans that strengthened the connection between religious conviction and health care policy.⁵⁷ New abortion restrictions use broad statutory language and now extend beyond pregnancy termination to contraception and in vitro fertilization. Legislation in states such as Alabama, Missouri, South Carolina, and

West Virginia targets “abortifacients,” a term so broad it could include any medication that may impact pregnancy, regardless of other therapeutic uses.

At the same time, “conscience clauses” have become a legislative priority for those seeking to limit health care access based on religious objections. These clauses allow individual health care workers or institutions to refuse to provide services—such as abortions, contraception, or gender-affirming treatments—or even refusing to treat unmarried pregnant people based on religious or moral objections.⁵⁸ While proponents argue these clauses protect the rights of providers, civil liberties groups and medical professionals warn they disproportionately harm vulnerable patients, forcing them to choose between essential medical services and their fundamental rights.⁵⁹ Another tactic to restrict abortion access is the enactment of “Fetal Personhood” laws, which grant embryos and fetuses full legal rights from conception, while subjecting pregnant people to surveillance and liability for adverse medical outcomes.⁶⁰

Public Funding of Religious Pregnancy Centers & Maternity Homes

In the U.S., crisis pregnancy centers and maternity homes are predominantly religious and largely unregulated organizations that present themselves as neutral, unbiased resources for people facing unplanned pregnancies.⁶¹ In reality, their primary purpose is to discourage people from accessing the full spectrum of reproductive health care by disseminating misleading or false medical information, delaying medical decisions until there is no alternative but to carry a pregnancy to term, and pressuring economically vulnerable people to carry to term in exchange for housing and other services.⁶²

After federal reproductive health protections were overturned in the *Dobbs*⁶³ decision, maternity homes and crisis pregnancy centers reemerged en masse. Many states that have restricted or banned abortion actively support these centers.⁶⁴ As of 2023, more than USD 429 million in taxpayer funding has been redirected to them, and some states have passed laws prohibiting any regulation of these centers despite their predatory practices.⁶⁵

Denial of Care vs. Health Care Transparency

Health care services are being undermined by state laws that allow health care providers, institutions, and insurers to discriminate against patients based on religious beliefs. Proponents of these “Denial of Care” laws argue health care workers are regularly forced to provide services that violate their “conscience” when, in fact, hospitals and other institutions regularly accommodate the desire of workers to avoid certain procedures which do not align with their religious beliefs.⁶⁶ In states where these measures have passed, a broad spectrum of health care providers and institutions can deny procedures, based solely on their religious or moral objections.⁶⁷ After the Tennessee state legislature enacted a denial of care law in 2025, at least one woman was forced to cross state

lines for prenatal care after her doctor refused treatment based on religious belief.⁶⁸

To shield citizens against denial of care, several states have introduced “Health Care Transparency” bills, which require providers to disclose non-medical restrictions on health care services. Even without a denial of care law, medical providers and institutions may still deny care based on religious beliefs and fail to disclose those restrictions.

Religious Exemptions to Vaccine Requirements

In 1998, a study linked childhood vaccinations with Autism Spectrum Disorder.⁶⁹ While it has been retracted and thoroughly disproven, it provided the foundation for disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories about the safety and efficacy of vaccinations. Mass resistance towards vaccination in the U.S. has since grown steadily,⁷⁰ resulting in resistance to vaccine mandates across the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vaccine opponents have frequently created non-medical exemptions under the guise of religious accommodation. Some religious sects in the U.S. discourage vaccination based on the false claim that vaccines contain fetal stem cells obtained from abortions, arguing that vaccination is incompatible with their theological beliefs.⁷¹ However, these non-medical exemptions endanger the general public while accommodating the religious beliefs of a few, as successful population immunity to disease depends upon the vast majority receiving timely vaccinations.⁷²

Anti-LGBTI+ Discrimination

The erosion of LGBTI+ protections has shifted focus beyond marriage equality to a broader effort targeting antidiscrimination measures in employment, public accommodations, and social services. While the U.S. Supreme Court had previously affirmed antidiscrimination protections for LGBTI+ employees in *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020), subsequent legal challenges and legislative actions have rolled back legal protections for LGBTI+ individuals and increasingly prioritized religious expression.⁷³

A more recent and aggressive anti-LGBTI+ development is the targeting of transgender people – and particularly minors. Since 2020, dozens of state laws banning or severely restricting gender-affirming care have been enacted.⁷⁴ Arguments supporting restrictions are often underpinned by religious justifications that frame gender-affirming care as harmful or as “mutilation,” thereby using state and federal power to enforce a specific religious viewpoint on health care.

Enacting gender-affirming care restrictions has become a significant aim for state legislatures dominated by religious extremists and nationalists. Arkansas became the first state to prohibit gender-affirming care for minors in 2021, characterizing the services as “experimental” despite support from every major U.S. medical association. Since then, 26 states have enacted laws restricting access to

medical care for transgender youth.

“Conversion therapy”, which aims to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity, also remains a key legislative battleground.

Recent legislation in states like Arkansas, Kansas, Montana, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Oklahoma have restricted pronoun use, the legal recognition of gender, and protected discriminatory practices by adoption agencies. They have targeted LGBTI+ youth under the guise of protecting religious freedom and freedom of speech, weaponizing these rights to allow discriminatory practices against vulnerable populations without fear of recourse. Foster care and adoption laws have been a primary target for anti-LGBTI+ lawmakers who use “religious freedom” to justify discriminatory policies. These laws limit placement options for LGBTI+ children in the foster care system despite the overwhelming number of children needing permanent homes.

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The Trump Administration continues to make a concerted effort to redefine the scope of free expression and constitutional rights, advancing a political and religious agenda that critics argue challenges longstanding democratic norms. Across multiple fronts, the executive branch has undermined established legal precedents, implemented policies controlling information and language, and weaponized government agencies to target dissent. These actions have involved renewed calls to criminalize flag burning, sweeping censorship plans, and the targeting of immigrants for exercising their freedom of speech and belief. This is part of a systematic strategy to subordinate individual freedoms to a specific ideology and these efforts are not isolated incidents, but part of a broader campaign to consolidate power and reshape the foundation of a free society.

Censorship in Media and Government Publications

President Trump’s sustained criticism of media outlets and individual journalists is a form of political pressure designed to discredit the free press and restrict freedom of thought. The administration’s January 2025 executive order, framed as “restoring freedom of speech and ending federal censorship,”⁷⁵ is a clear example of the current executive branch’s strategy to undermine, discredit, and censor opinions that do not align with its agenda. Critics contend this executive order is not about protecting diverse viewpoints, but is aimed at controlling content moderation efforts of media companies. Subsequently, it creates a pretext for the federal government to intervene in the business of private companies. This approach falsely equates a private company’s decision to remove misinformation or hate speech with “federal censorship,” thereby creating a path to control the flow of information in accordance with Project 2025.

Since the beginning of Trump's second presidency, many of Project 2025's proposals for government-sanctioned censorship are under implementation. These include efforts to exclude specific viewpoints and marginalized communities from public life – by banning terms like “sexual orientation,” “gender identity,” and “diversity, equity, and inclusion” in federal documents and limiting federally-funded scientific research.⁷⁶ These actions are a clear attempt to control language and thought. Project 2025 additionally threatens social media companies that have tried to curb misinformation and disinformation, such as “election falsehoods,” or other content deemed “political viewpoints.”

In August 2025, President Trump signed an executive order granting political appointees increased authority over the allocation of billions of dollars in federal grants. The order has already resulted in the termination of thousands of grants, including projects on transgender health and vaccinations.⁷⁷

President Trump also signed executive orders terminating all Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs across the federal government and ordering federal agencies to cease issuing policies or communications that promote “gender ideology.”⁷⁸ As a direct result, the Department of Education removed over 200 web pages and archived documents with DEI-related content, while other agencies began to eliminate gender identity from official forms and documents. Civil liberties and interfaith groups view this effort to control language and thought within the government as a deliberate attempt to dismantle the separation of church and state and to impose a singular religious worldview on U.S. society.

State Sponsored Censorship and Protections

Throughout the country, states have enacted restrictive censorship laws that prohibit Americans' access to library books and resources.⁷⁹ These laws force libraries to satisfy the religious, ideological, or partisan preferences of a vocal minority. Some states have enacted harsh restrictions requiring the removal of thousands of books deemed “objectionable” by a single complainant. The subjective “objectionable” standard is most often used to prevent libraries from carrying materials related to the LGBTI+ community, sexuality, race, and religion.⁸⁰

In response, other states have introduced “Freedom to Read” bills, which affirm the right to be exposed to new information and diverse perspectives. It is considered to be an essential part of a pluralistic democracy that must not be infringed upon.⁸¹

Retaliatory Detention of Immigrants for Political Speech

The weaponization of immigration policies to punish individuals for their political speech and religious beliefs is a serious violation of human and constitutional rights. In the past year, Trump Administration officials have targeted immigrant communities for expressing critical views or for their religious practices. For instance, reports

have surfaced of visa holders who have been detained – or had their visa applications denied or revoked – after engaging in political protests, posting dissenting opinions on social media, or because of their non-Christian religious beliefs. This trend is powerfully highlighted by the case of Mahmoud Khalil, a lawful permanent resident of the U.S. and a pro-Palestinian activist who was arrested and detained by immigration officials for his advocacy. The administration justified the move by claiming his protected speech was a “threat to national security.”⁸²

Such actions violate due process by failing to provide fair hearings or clear legal standards in accordance with U.S. constitutional law. This has created a chilling effect on immigrants and international students, sending the message that one could risk losing legal status by exercising one's right to free expression or religious practice. It constitutes a clear abuse of power and a direct threat to the rights of all individuals within U.S. borders, regardless of their immigration status or religious affiliation.

These collective actions and proposals represent a concerted effort to undermine the principles of free expression and are part of a broader strategy to silence critics, control information, and consolidate power among far-right religious nationalists.

The Non-religious in Congress and Public Service

The role of the non-religious in U.S. public service exists within a political environment increasingly dominated by far-right Christian nationalism, championed by the Trump Administration. This movement advances a social narrative that links being American with being religious and, specifically, Christian.

In such an environment, criticism of conservative Christian movements and their political agendas is conflated with being “anti-American.” This narrative, reinforced by the rhetoric and policies of the Trump Administration, is a powerful tool used to delegitimize dissent and consolidate political power around a specific religious worldview.⁸³

Amid this cultural and political landscape, the Congressional Freethought Caucus, founded in 2018, remains a vital voice for non-religious Americans in the federal government. The caucus's mission is to promote science and reason-based policy solutions, defend the secular character of government, and oppose discrimination against atheists, agnostics, humanists, and others. The caucus has been particularly active in opposition to the rise of religious nationalism, hosting briefings and releasing white papers on the subject.

As of writing, the caucus has grown to 32 members, who champion freedom of religion and belief (including the non-religious) and actively oppose policies perceived as undermining church-state separation.⁸⁴ While most caucus members are affiliated with a religious tradition, their coalition represents a significant step forward

for the non-religious voice in the U.S. government and creates a formal platform for their concerns. Even so, many politicians remain reluctant to publicly identify as non-religious due to societal stigma and perceived political repercussions.

Polling data suggests that while acceptance of non-religious political candidates is growing, a significant portion of the U.S. electorate still expresses reluctance to vote for an atheist, limiting the number of openly non-religious individuals in Congress. A 2020 Gallup poll found that approximately two-thirds of Americans would be willing to vote for a presidential candidate who is an atheist, a lower percentage than for candidates who are Catholic, Jewish, or a woman. A 2024 study further confirmed this disadvantage, finding the strongest bias among Republicans, Independents, and religious voters.⁸⁵ These findings highlight a persistent stigma that contributes to the underrepresentation of openly non-religious individuals in Congress.⁸

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