**President Biden must prioritize international religious freedom**

President [Biden](https://thehill.com/person/biden) has [promised](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again) to organize “a global Summit for Democracy” this year as part of his administration’s effort to restore America’s global leadership role. Biden’s priorities for the world’s democracies are “fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism and advancing human rights.”

Adding protection of religious freedom to that list of priorities would attract support from American conservatives, help strengthen the democracy and human rights agenda in foreign policy and contribute to Biden’s goal of diminishing polarization at home.

As an immigrant and a Muslim woman of color, I rejoiced when Biden rejected the ban on travel from several African and majority-Muslim countries. The country I came to as a teenager in the early 1980s had for the past four years become a scary and unrecognizable place. I had never experienced otherization of this kind except in the country of my birth.

Ending discriminatory regulations in the U.S. serves as the “power of our example,” Biden spoke of in his [inaugural address](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/). But the U.S. also has much to contribute to protecting religious minorities of all faith traditions across the world.

This would involve robust defense of Christians currently oppressed in the Middle East, India, China, North Korea and parts of Africa, along with oppressed Muslim Uighurs

and Rohingyas in China and Myanmar, as well as Hindus, Ahmadis, Yazidis and Bahais elsewhere.

Discourse on international religious freedom in the U.S. has been dominated by the religious right. The Biden administration could make it a liberal, progressive concern, finding common cause with religious conservatives who worry about the state of their co-religionists abroad.

Liberal and even progressive politicians need not see international religious freedom as a matter of religion but as a question of human rights. As a man of faith elected with support from the left of America’s political spectrum, Biden is best positioned to emphasize the oft ignored Article 18 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/#:~:text=Article%2018.,%2C%20practice%2C%20worship%20and%20observance.).

That article recognizes “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” including the “freedom to change” one’s religion or belief. It also affirms the freedom to teach, practice, worship and observe the tenets of one’s faith, individually or in community with others. Freedom of religion or belief also protects the right of individuals to not have religion at all.

Power politics have often constrained international action on behalf of oppressed religious minorities. But religious freedom abroad has been [part](https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/international-religious-freedom-in-the-biden-administration) of U.S. foreign policy going back to President Theodore Roosevelt’s support of Jews against the Russian Pogroms in 1903.

The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), passed in 1998, during the Clinton administration, created an institutional framework for a U.S. role in advancing religious freedom around the world. But the effectiveness of the [ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Ambassador-at-Large_for_International_Religious_Freedom) within the Department of State, and the bipartisan [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](https://www.uscirf.gov/) (USCIRF), depend on the importance that a president and his chief policy advisers extend to these offices.

For example, USCIRF’s annual report on international religious freedom includes recommendations to designate “Countries of particular Concern.” But the secretary of state is authorized to waive sanctions in cases of countries that are important for strategic national security reasons.

Waivers, which were meant to be given in exceptional circumstances, ended up becoming the norm for some countries that are egregious violators of religious freedom. Authoritarian rulers friendly with the United States have been able to secure waivers by just throwing temper tantrums about bad publicity, without showing any inclination to change repressive policies.

President Biden could instruct his secretary of state, [Antony Blinken](https://thehill.com/people/antony-blinken), to use the secretary’s waiver power only sparingly and only when a major U.S. interest is likely to be threatened by imposition of sanctions at a specific time. Countries that require waivers year after year must be put on notice that their mistreatment of religious minorities seriously threatens their relationship with the U.S.

During his [confirmation hearing](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2021/01/19/biden-nominee-antony-blinken-china-committing-genocide-uyghurs/4215835001/), Blinken was given an early indication of the new administration’s commitment to human rights and freedom of religion and belief. Blinken supported the Trump administration’s eleventh-hour determination that China’s treatment of the Uighur Muslim populace amounted to genocide.

If the administration sticks to a principled stance on human rights and international religious freedom, it will find support from many people of faith from different traditions inside and outside America.

Opposing persecution of religious minorities by majoritarian regimes will also prove to be a strength in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, instead of weakening the hand of American diplomats, as is sometimes assumed.

The U.S. would reclaim the mantle of being the world’s leader on issues of democracy and protecting human rights, while laying down a marker for why America, and not an authoritarian regime, has the right to global leadership.

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