President Biden~ must prioritize international religious freedom

President has to organize “aglobalSummitforDemocracy~” 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 America~n 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 Africa~n~ and majority-Muslim~ countries. The country I came to as a teenager in the early1980s~ 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 US~ serves as the “power of our example,” Biden~ spoke of in his . But the US~ 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 MiddleEast~, India~, China~, NorthKorea~ 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 US~ 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 .

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 of US~ foreign policy going back to President TheodoreRoosevelt~’s support of Jews~ against the RussianPogroms~ in 1903~.

TheInternationalReligiousFreedomAct~ (IRFA), passed in 1998~, during the Clinton~ administration, created an institutional framework for a US~ role in advancing religious freedom around the world. But the effectiveness of the within the DepartmentofState~, and the bipartisan (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 UnitedStates~ 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~, , to use the secretary’s waiver power only sparingly and only when a major US~ 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 US~

During his , 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 US~ foreign policy, instead of weakening the hand of America~n diplomats, as is sometimes assumed.

The US~ 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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