

Human Rights Committee

Freedom of Speech and Misinformation



<https://www.aft.org/hc/fall2020/nossel>

"Everyone is in favor of free speech. Hardly a day passes without it being extolled, but some people's idea of it is that they are free to say what they like, but if anyone says anything back, that is an outrage."

— Winston Churchill

"Words matter; they are the first step to acknowledge that there is a violation of human rights, or that human rights are still not well protected."

— Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018-2022)

Dear delegates, the following is the study guide that you will use for the **UNHRC** committee.

Introduction to the Human Rights Council

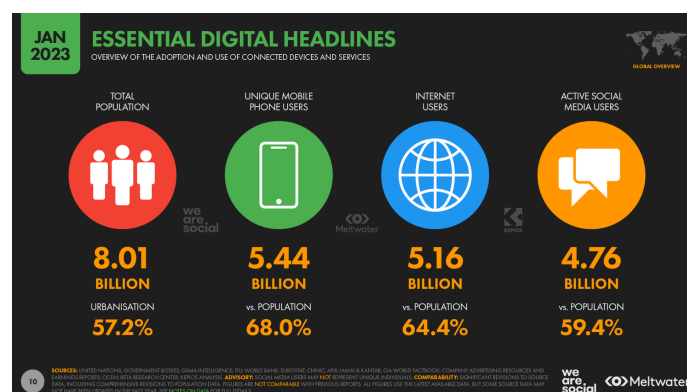
The Human Rights Council (**UNHRC**) is an important UN body based in Geneva, Switzerland whose goal is to promote and strengthen the respect for human rights around the world and address situations of human rights violation. It was established in 2006, replacing the UNCHR. Among the important issues which the HRC must address are: women's rights, freedom of belief and religion, freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly.

The Council is made up of 47 member countries, chosen by region (for example, "African States" and "Eastern European States") for 3 year terms. HRC Meetings are held 3 times a year, in March, June and September.

Freedom of Speech and Misinformation

Freedom of speech is defined by **Oxford Languages** as "the power or right to express one's opinions without **censorship**, **restraint**, or **legal penalty**.". Misinformation is defined as "false or **inaccurate** information, especially that which is **deliberately** intended to **deceive**." In this committee, a significant part of the discussion will focus on exploring the subtle distinction between these concepts. This committee will address all aspects of the use of false information spreading online, but those intended to cause harm, and those which cause harm unintentionally.

With the rise of the utilization of technology and social media, misinformation is a growing concern. It is difficult to mitigate the spread of misinformation and hate speech while also maintaining an individual's right to freedom of speech. This challenge was heightened during the **COVID-19** period due to people having excessive amounts of time on their hands which led to increased internet media usage. Understandably, it is a global problem.



<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report>

In recent years, there has been another increase of misinformation even after the COVID-19 pandemic subsided. With the rise of AI media such as **chatGPT** and others, individuals have a far

easier time accessing information which may not be accurate. ChatGPT and the like are works in progress and are not in any way exempt from mistakes, even more so than real people behind screens. Because of this, some of the statements these AI tools give could be [complicit](#) in the spread of misinformation.

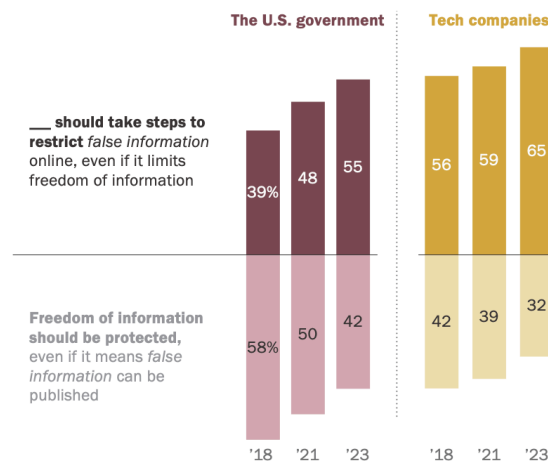
Another unfortunate and related effect, is the rise of hate speech, with disinformation serving as a tool to promote xenophobia, and divide groups of people. For example, in July 2024 the UK faced [widespread anti-immigrant protests](#), and [attacks on mosques](#), after a horrific murder was falsely attributed to a [Muslim immigrant named Ali](#) (the perpetrator had [actually been a British born Christian named Axel](#)). had been

On June 24, of this year, the UN launched [The United Nations Global Principles for Information Integrity](#). At this launch, the UN Secretary General, [António Guterres](#) gave a statement saying, “The world must respond to the harm caused by the spread of online hate and lies while robustly upholding human rights.” Guterres put forth an international course of action in hopes of making informational forums more safe worldwide. The goal of this launch is to do just that, the official site emphasizes the risks of AI technology and social media access on the spread of misinformation.

The main task at hand is to find the medium between maintaining freedom of speech while minimizing misinformation and hate speech.

Support for the U.S. government and tech companies restricting false information online has risen steadily in recent years

% of U.S. adults who say ...



Note: Respondents who did not answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-11, 2023.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/20/most-americans-favor-restrictions-on-false-information-violent-content-online/>

Historical Context:

Misinformation is certainly nothing new, the goal of it has always been to gain something, be it fame, triumph, or simply to prey on another's downfall. According to [the BBC](#), evidence of this dates all the way back to 2000 years ago, when the son of Julius Caesar, Octavian, wanted to win the Roman Republic civil war so badly that he made up lies about his enemy, Mark Anthony, to win over the public. The lies he made up were quite childish yet very harmful. He spread his message through poetry and coin slogans. This is comparable to fake news articles and handouts containing misinformation.

There is also evidence that misinformation was an issue in the 19th century. This was the era of time where newspapers were the primary source of current information for many people. One article, published by "[The New York Sun](#)" in 1835, claimed that unicorns, two-legged beavers, and even "flying bat-men" lived on the moon. To make these ridiculous claims more believable they stated that the information came from a well known astronomer. This is an example of how one can use background information, (be it real or fake), to support their false claims, making those receiving the information all the more susceptible to believing it.

In 2020 the [National Library of Medicine](#) published an article on "[The Danger of Misinformation in the COVID-19 crisis](#)." The article highlights how this was the first pandemic of this nature that the era of technology has seen. Because of this, it was fairly easy for misinformed posters, (or perhaps just internet trolls), to alarm unknowing readers online. An example brought to light in this article is how at the beginning of the pandemic, users online claimed that ingesting disinfectants could potentially prevent COVID-19. Because of this, the [CDC](#) (Center for Disease Control), reported an increase of emergency calls to the poison control centers. These practices such as, "washing food with bleach, applying household cleaners directly to skin, and intentionally inhaling or ingesting disinfectants", were undoubtedly dangerous, even counterproductive to the victims hoping to avoid COVID-19. Actions were taken in hopes of addressing this and putting a stop to it. One largely significant example is "[The Verified Initiative](#)". The main goal of this initiative was to detect misinformation and replace it with scientifically proven facts regarding the pandemic. This could be seen through social media, for example, where if there was a disproven "fact" about COVID-19 it would flag it and say "false information detected, learn more about COVID-19 [here](#)". This seemingly small act did a large justice in spreading truthful information regarding the pandemic.

Current situation:

As of today the UN struggles greatly with putting a stop to the spread of misinformation. This is especially true with information regarding war, political elections, public health, and many more important issues. On June 24, of this year, the UN launched a press release which stated the issues they are trying to deal with regarding the situation, as well as, a number of proposals for

addressing the situation. These proposals include:

- encouraging tech companies, governments, and the like, to “refrain from using, supporting, or amplifying disinformation and hate speech”
- urging [stakeholders](#) of AI technologies to “ensure that all AI technologies are designed, deployed, and used safely” and uphold human rights”
- imploring advertisement companies to “demand transparency in digital advertising processes” to ensure that agreements do not align with the promotion of hate speech and misinformation

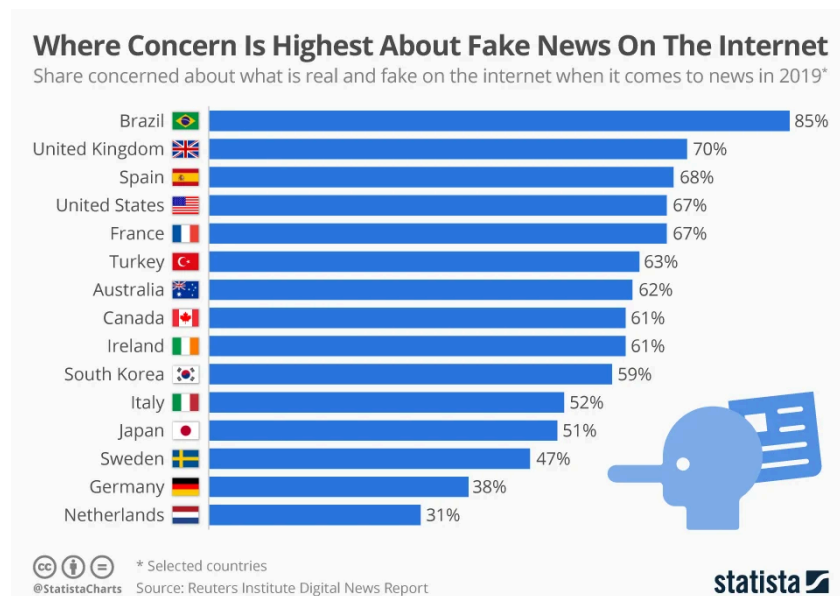
Many more ideas were mentioned and can be found [here](#).¹

Misinformation is a growing challenge that will only increase with the spread of internet access, especially social media and search engines. In countries with little to no access to the internet this issue is miniscule, however, could still be an issue nonetheless. Delegations must focus on how this issue affects their country and what their approach will be to putting a stop to it.

UN Efforts

The current UN efforts include the aforementioned efforts and others mentioned in the press release.

- “[The Verified Initiative](#)”
- UNESCO [Media and Information Literacy](#) Programs
- <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact?scrlybrkr=b1ba63ce>



<https://www.digitalinformationworld.com/2019/06/where-concern-is-highest-about-fake-news-on-the-internet.html>

¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2024/06/global-principles-information-integrity-launch/>

Key Issues

- **Public Health Risks:** The spread of misinformation during health crises, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, is very prominent and very dangerous and can cause panic and can do all sorts of harm.
- **Human Rights Violations:** The spread of misinformation can both abuse and prevent freedom of speech, which is a violation of human rights. It does so by disregarding the truthful information which might be otherwise available and replacing it with non-factual information.
- **Polarization:** Fake news and disinformation are powerful tools used to create even greater wedges within society, making it more difficult to see different perspectives. But banning users can only further this phenomenon. For example when Donald Trump was banned from Twitter and created his own social media platform, it only increased the separation between different groups of people.
- **Hate speech:** Fake news can be used to promote false claims against groups of people (Jews, Muslims, immigrants, political groups, etc.), fueling abuse, violence and other human rights abuses.
- **Impact on Government:** Misinformation can have a largely negative impact on governments. It poses a [threat to democratic processes such as elections](#). It can be used to paint electoral candidates in a bad light in hopes of swaying voters in another direction, in doing this it is ultimately taking away an individual's right to choose on their own without negative influence.
- **Digital Media and AI Technologies:** A lot of misinformation comes from digital media, which is now the primary media source for [approximately 67% of the global population](#). With the rise of AI such as chatGPT, we are facing a whole new reality of AI-fueled fake news. But AI also has the potential to help detect and even combat fake news.
- **Freedom of speech:** Noting all these issues, it is important to emphasize the cardinal importance of freedom of speech in democratic societies, as a primary method of protecting individuals from governmental abuses. Simply banning or even regulating speech could easily turn into a tool used by governments to abuse or manipulate citizens.
- **Regulation issues:** With so many different forms of media and so many users worldwide, it is incredibly difficult to efficiently regulate everything at once 100% of the time. Users online and elsewhere have free will and have protected human rights under the law. Therefore users can say and do as they please, especially under fake accounts and [pseudonyms](#). This makes it nearly impossible to regulate everything as nobody has the ability to control each individual person, nor is it ethical.
- **Public-private:** There are much more liberties for individuals, and private companies. But how should large platforms like Tiktok, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc. be treated? [Can these companies set their own rules](#) for what information is shared? Or are they so

broad as to be considered public (digital) space? And if so, [who should regulate them](#)—national governments, the UN, social media users themselves, or another entity?

Guiding questions

- How widespread is internet access and [social media in your country](#)?
- How influential is the fake news phenomenon in your country?
- How is [social media perceived in your country](#)? What is your country/delegation doing to mitigate the spread of misinformation?
- How strongly does your country protect [freedom of speech](#) and [web freedom](#)?
- Has your country led any initiatives or passed laws on these topics?
- How can there be balance between freedom of speech and protecting individuals from misinformation and hate speech?
- What role do media organizations play in balancing freedom of speech with the responsibility to prevent misinformation? Who should be held responsible?
- How can international corporations make a better effort to address misinformation while upholding human rights?
- What impact does misinformation have on government processes in your country?
- What impact does misinformation have on public health in your country?

Learn more:

- [UN principles for information integrity](#)
- NATO: [countering disinformation](#)
- [Guide to dis/misinformation](#)
- [Toolkit](#)
- <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-freedom-of-opinion-and-expression>
- <https://unric.org/en/unric-library-background-er-combat-misinformation/>
- [Which platforms have the most disinformation?](#)
- [Why do people share misinformation?](#)
- [Pew social media trends and views](#)
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7721433/>
- <https://www.un.org/en/information-integrity>
- <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy>
- <https://www.unesco.org/en/freedom-expression-online?scrlybrkr=b1ba63ce>

Resolutions and reports

- Freedom expression report: <https://www.globalexpressionreport.org/>
- [UNHRC Resolution](#) 44/12 (2020)
- <https://freedomhouse.org/policy-recommendations/internet-freedom>
- HRC Resolution 52/9 [Page 51](#)

Human Rights Committee

Freedom of Religion



<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/states-must-address-prejudice-and-discrimination-based-religion-or-belief>

Reaffirming the positive role that the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the full respect for the freedom to seek, receive and impart information can play in strengthening democracy and combating religious intolerance,

Recognizing the valuable contribution of people of all religions or beliefs to humanity and the contribution that dialogue among religious groups can make towards an improved awareness and understanding of the common values shared by all humankind,

HRC Resolution 16/18 (2011)

Dear delegates, the following is the study guide that you will use for the **UNHRC** committee.

Summary

Although the UN enshrined freedom of religion in Article 18 of the Declaration of Human Rights, the actual approach to religion varies by country. Today [citizens in 61 countries](#) are said to experience discrimination or persecution based on their religious choices, while the US Commission on International Religious Freedom lists 17 “Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs)” and another 11 countries recommended the “Special Watch List (SWL). This constitutes over half of the world’s population, as many of the most populous countries are included. The HRC committee will discuss laws and policies which target religious minorities, or favor one group over another, as well as societal violations, from a human rights paradigm.

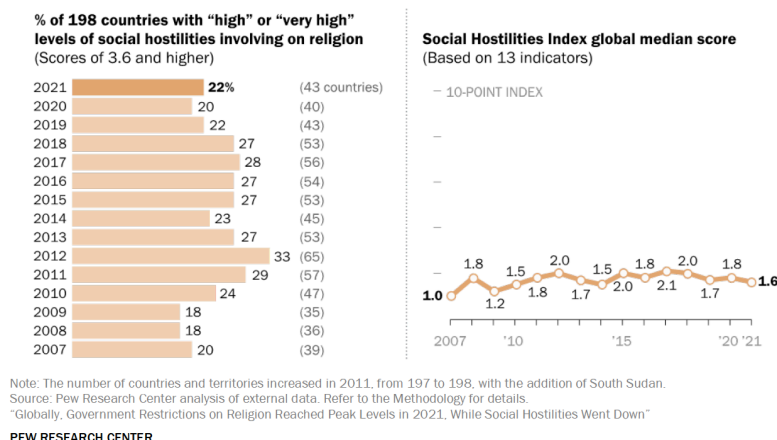
Freedom of Religion

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states clearly:

“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.”

In practice, millions of people around the world struggle to obtain these basic rights on a daily basis. There are a range of reasons and factors: Authoritarian governments that simply don’t value or prioritize personal freedoms; secular governments that treat religion as a threat; a government which abides by or upholds one religion, at the expense of other religions; governmental recognition of one stream of a religion, causing other subgroups of that religion to face discrimination; historical conflicts between religious groups, often intertwined with nationalist or ethnic tensions, and societal hostility to one or more religious groups. In some cases, the application of religious freedom may be made more complex by competing values, a clash with national regulations, or safety arguments.

Number of countries with 'high' or 'very high' social hostilities involving religion rose in 2021, while global median level of social hostilities decreased



<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/05/globally-government-restrictions-on-religion-reached-peak-levels-in-2021-while-social-hostilities-went-down/>

The manifestation of a restriction on religious freedom can take several forms. In some cases individuals may face overt or implicit xenophobia from colleagues, classmates or neighbors, perhaps in the form of only the largest group's holidays being recognized as off days from work, or only certain prayers being performed in school. In the most extreme cases, some or all religious practices may be effectively banned or limited, especially with non-recognized branches of the officially designated religion. Here are some practical examples:

- **Egypt:** Egypt is a country with a 90% Muslim population, and 9% Christian (mainly coptic) minority. The national constitution declares that Islam is the state religion (Article 2), while also promising religious freedom (Article 64). However that freedom is only promised to Christians and Jews, leaving groups [like the Baha'i](#) unrecognized, and unable to practice their religion openly and freely, while [Ahmadiyya Muslims](#) and Shi'a are discriminated against [for holding non-Sunni beliefs](#), or different religious practices.

In Egypt all citizens must have citizenship cards, by penalty of imprisonment, forcing minorities to accept a religious identity they may not agree with, as well as being bound by the restrictions applicable to that religion. Even a [simple mistaken listing](#) could take years to fix, while trying to choose one's religion, the definition of religious freedom, [could force a person to become a refugee](#).

But the situation becomes even more complicated, when we realize that even minorities may lose freedoms from their own religious leaders. For example, the Coptic Church of Egypt does not allow divorce, and Egypt only recognizes personal status by religion, meaning that [Coptic Christians can only divorce by formally leaving the church](#) and accepting Islam.

- **North Korea:** The official national belief system of North Korea (“[Juche](#)”) mandates a belief system onto all citizens, [essentially banning any competing beliefs like religion](#). Thus the dwindling Protestant Christian minority, as well as those who follow traditional [shamanistic practices](#), face persecution by the government as “traitors”. In 2023 the HRC [passed a resolution](#) censuring North Korea for religious freedom violations.
- **Afghanistan:** Since falling under Taliban control again, Afghanistan has faced a rapidly deteriorating situation regarding religious freedom. The Taliban imposed an extremist interpretation of Sunni Islamic law on all Afghans, with harsh penalties. The small number of non-Muslims in the country are at risk, as are [Shi’a and Sufis, who can be deemed heretics](#), subject to the death penalty. Sunni-Shi’a marriages have even been [banned in some areas](#). The situation is exacerbated by the even more radical Islamic State, which has targeted [Sikh temples](#) and [Shi’a mosques](#).
- **Myanmar:** In Myanmar, a country with a population that is 88% Buddhist, 6% Christian and 4% Muslim population, a film director and 13 actors, including a twelve year old girl were arrested after [producing a film seen as critical of Buddhism](#). Rohingya Muslims have been denied rights, persecuted, forced from their homes, and brutally attacked, in what the [US State Department calls a genocide](#).
- **Russia:** In Russia, which has a legacy of intolerance of religion, religious activity has been linked with political activism, and punished by the government. Muslim activists have been [put in prison](#) for trying to organize, while the Christian [Jehova’s Witnesses have been fined](#) just for gathering.
- **China:** As with North Korea, China’s state communist ideology is at odds with religious beliefs, authorities, and freedom. Consequently, China is responsible for over a third of the arrests and disappearances listed by the USCIRF. Other forms of intervention and abuse include [changing the bible](#) to conform with the Chinese Community party ideology, [closing mosques](#), or [adapting them to look “more Chinese”](#), [detention and “re-education” camps for Uyghur Muslims](#), and the ongoing [kidnapping and torture of Falun Gong members](#).
- **Turkmenistan:** Turkmenistan’s population is 89% Muslim, but its government is authoritarian, leading to accusations of women not allowed to wear hijab, and [men forced to shave their beards](#). Activities like [owning a Quran](#), [organizing Muslim community groups](#), and [studying the works of Muslim scholars](#), can lead to imprisonment.
- **Iran:** Iran’s authoritarian Shi’a government has arrested, imprisoned, beaten and otherwise persecuted [Armenian Christians](#), [Bahais](#), [Sufi leaders](#) and [prayer leaders](#), and

gave lashes to [Sunni leader Seifallah Hosseini](#). The “Bill to Protect the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab” further restricts women’s rights.

- **France:** Although a democracy, France’s [laicite](#) principle guarantees secularism (Article 1 in the French Constitution), although its constitution also pledges to protect freedom of religion. In practice this has created tension, for example regarding the right to wear religious clothing in public schools ([banned by a 2004 law](#)), or to wear a full-face veil (niqab or burka) in public (a 2010 law which [made it to the European Court of Human Rights, and the UN Human Rights Committee](#)). This forced secularism is seen by its advocates as protecting citizens from having a religion forced on it by the state, but is criticized by others as unfairly restricting individuals from following religious beliefs.
- **United States:** Although the United States is committed to religious freedom (the very [first amendment to the Constitution](#)), a number of interesting issues have arisen over the years regarding competing values. For example, the [American Indian Religious Freedom Act](#) dealt with Native American religious practices that would otherwise violate existing US laws, like using feathers or bones from protected species, or [hallucinegenic drugs used in rituals](#) (the [Supreme Court later expanded this](#) to include even “new” churches). Another area of controversy has been the [refusal of goods and service providers](#) (even [priests](#)) to participate in LGBTQ weddings, an area where protection from discrimination based on orientation clashes with the right to freedom in religious beliefs.



<https://thepreachersword.com/2021/04/13/>

UN Efforts

Among important UN efforts to ensure religious freedom, are the inclusion of a right to religious freedom under article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, the appointment of

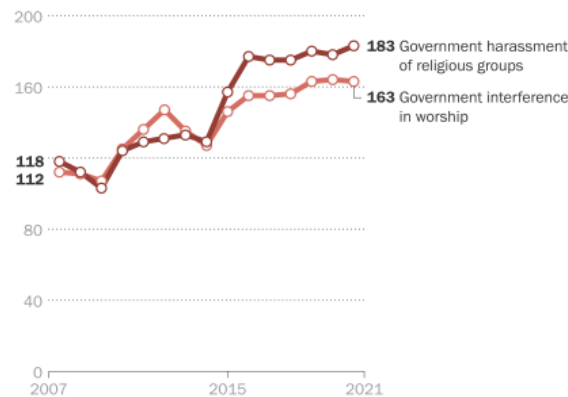
a [Special Rapporteur](#) who visits countries and makes reports to the UN Secretary General, Security Council, Human Rights Council and other bodies, and the passing of UNGA Resolution A/RES/73/296 (2019) declaring August 22 the “International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief”

Key Issues

- **Government role:** In most cases, the role of the government is the most influential factor, as laws, policies, like getting holidays off, ministries like the ministry of education, religious affairs, or interior ministry, and official status all shape how religion can be practiced in a country.
- **Societal:** In some cases there are powerful societal influences that must be addressed, for example when minority religious groups face discrimination from a critical majority.
- **Clashes with other values:** The most complex cases may be when opposing values are at stake, for example religious freedom vs. LGBTQ acceptance, polygamy, or gender equality. Should religious groups be forced to accept other values even when they don't align with their belief system? Or do the other values give way?
- **Blasphemy laws:** In more conservative religious countries, blasphemy laws control what can be said to avoid “offending public sensitivities.” The punishments can be as severe as imprisonment and even death.
- **Security:** is often used as a pretense for restrictions, for example arrests or detention, or when dealing with religious dress codes, face coverings, and ID.
- **Freedom from religion?:** Should more countries follow the French model of preventing any religious influence in the public sphere? Or is that itself a violation of the right to freedom of religion?
- **Asylum:** The international definition of refugee is one who has ‘a well founded fear of persecution for [reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a social group](#).’ Is this definition enough? Is it too broad? How does it impact the fight for religious freedom?
- **Who speaks for a religion?** There are often competing voices, even within the same religion, and a formal recognition means that the government must play the part of identifying who is the (more) “authentic” representative.
- **Cults:** When does a group cross the line from legitimate religious belief and practice to a cult? How can a government determine that objectively?

Since 2007, number of countries where governments have harassed religious groups or interfered in worship has increased

Number of countries and territories where there was ____ in 2021



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.
"Globally, Government Restrictions on Religion Reached Peak Levels in 2021, While Social Hostilities Went Down"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/05/globally-government-restrictions-on-religion-reached-peak-levels-in-2021-while-social-hostilities-went-down/>

Key Actors:

- **Government agencies:** They bear a responsibility to protect citizens and ensure religious freedom, but often it is government laws or agencies who are the main perpetrators.
- **Religious leaders/institutions:** Their relationships with one another and with the state often shape whether religious diversity leads to tension or harmony.
- **Religious governments:** Often, incorporating a religion into the government identity means that not only will other religions face discrimination, but there may even be a power struggle for who represents the main religion.
- **Secular governments:** Being secular does not guarantee religious freedom—the question is whether individuals are free to practice their religions equally.
- **Human rights NGOs:** Active locally and globally to raise awareness, educate citizens, and get laws changed, passed or enforced, to ensure religious freedom for all.
- **Religion minorities:** Typically the ones who suffer the most from a lack of religious freedom.
- **Violent non-state actors:** Extremist groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, etc., are some of the world's most egregious violators of religious freedom.
- **UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion:** A UN diplomat whose [focus is on raising awareness](#) about the challenges facing religious freedom around the world.

Guiding questions

- [How free is your country?](#)
- [Where does your country rank?](#)

- [Does your country have a blasphemy law?](#)
- Has your country passed any important laws or initiatives on this topic?
- Which of these issues do you want to address? What are your ideas?

Learn more:

- [Clashes of competing values](#)
- <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147437>

Resolutions and reports

- [2024 International Religious Freedom Report](#) (US Commission)
- [2023 ACN report on Religious Freedom](#)
- [HRC Resolution 16/18](#) (Combating intolerance and violence based on religion or belief)
- [UN Special Rapporteur report](#)
- [Key findings on religious freedom around the world](#)
- [Restrictions on religious freedom peak in 2021](#)