

# HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL



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## LETTER TO THE DELEGATES

Hello dear delegates,

We welcome you with great excitement to the 2023 SMUN's United Nations Human Rights Council! It is an honor for us, Pauline Kotai and Liv Kemmsies, to chair this committee and we assure you of our commitment to making this debate gripping, engaging, thought-provoking, and of course, unforgettable. Needless to say, it is essential for delegates to do thorough research beforehand on the topic and current situation of each country since it is necessary for finding reasonable and coherent solutions.

It is indispensable to maintain respect and diplomacy towards all religions and ethnicities and to not violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when writing resolutions and speeches.

Throughout the three days of SMUN, you will partake in discussions regarding how the right of freedom of religion is violated by persecution and other transgressions in the African continent. It will be fundamental to consider the events that have led to the massive oppression rise within the African continent to understand and treat the current events in the most respectful and factual manner, as well as have a better understanding of the condition. As it may be evident at a first glance when researching religious persecution in African countries, the main target of mistreatment are people who live by Christian beliefs. Although it undoubtedly is a leading aspect of what the committee's topic englobes, we suggest searching about discrimination against Muslim and traditional African religions as well, in the interest of increasing the religions



whose right of belief you will be ensuring, since it is an issue involving more than just Christianity.

On that note, we sincerely hope this background guide is supportive and acts as a starting point for your research. Do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

See you soon!

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## COMMITTEE DESCRIPTION



The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) was first established on March 15th, 2006, as a replacement to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, being responsible for promoting and protecting human rights around the world. It discusses several important topics, especially those in which there are severe violations of human rights, and gives suggestions on how to treat the situation. The council is made up of 47 members elected by the General Assembly, with each member serving three year terms with the possibility of reelection, and meets up at the UN office in Geneva, Switzerland.

The HRC monitors and investigates human rights situations in different countries, discusses thematic human rights concerns, and encourages states to implement measures to safeguard human rights within their territories, as well as ensuring accountability for human rights violations.



The HRC's work primarily revolves around three main pillars: promotion, protection, and accountability, with the basis of what is discussed and upheld in the HRC being the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was proclaimed in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly and serves as the base and inspiration for countless human rights treaties around the world, setting for the first time the indispensable human rights that should be maintained. The 30 articles in the UDHR determine the basic rights every person should possess, describing them as “equal and inalienable”. Those rights are depicted as not only rights but also obligations that should be always maintained by the law.

In conclusion, the HRC has a great importance within the United Nations, serving to promote and protect human rights around the world, examining and addressing global human rights issues, and striving to create a world where every individual can enjoy the full realization of their human rights.



## TOPIC A: Freedom of Religion



### Historical background

It is notorious that African countries are linked to religions. Even before Christianity and Islam were popularized, traditional indigenous practices were essential to the variety of ethnicities throughout the continent. It is not clear as to a specific number of indigenous religions, due to lack of consensus and infrastructure to conduct reliable research, but some speculations reach the thousands. With the introduction of Islam and Christianity, many of indigenous beliefs merged, creating syncretism.

The first major contact and extension of Islam in Africa was in the early 7th century through Arab merchants, traders and missionaries in mostly peaceful manners. In less than a century, many emperors of the west and north coast, as Egypt, had converted to Islam, also due to its convenience for influencing in other aspects of life and ruling, such as architecture, administration and law, many of which are still present in most muslim countries nowadays. From that point to the 14th century, when another sizable wave of Arab migration and military



interventions took place, multiple sub saharan kingdoms converted to Islam. The spread of Christianity in the 18th century and the desire to maintain traditional religions and practices proved to be a challenge in the spread of Islam in Africa, leading to resistance against adopting the religion.

Before becoming predominantly Muslim, the sub-Saharan areas of Africa, including Egypt, were significantly influenced by Christianity during the Roman era. However, it is infamous that European colonization was an important factor for the spreading of Christianity, especially with the Portuguese influences coming from the southwestern coast of Africa. Throughout the 15th to 18th centuries, many attempts to convert the population were made, which led to the arrival of European missionaries and the establishment of trade routes that facilitated religious exchanges. However, the suppression of indigenous religious beliefs caused by these political movements and colonization had lasting impacts on the African religious landscape, with the imposition of foreign religious practices disrupting traditional belief systems and cultural identities and consequently contributing to enduring issues that African nations face to this day, showcased by social and religious tensions present in some regions.

How the right of freedom of religion is determined in each constitution throughout Africa and cannot be generalized, considering that each country has a different historical background regarding faith. For instance, because of the wave of migration of the Muslim population in the 7th century coming from southwestern Asia, as the first major contact of Islam in the African continent, and other socio-political issues, the majority of countries located on the north and west coast of Africa are declared Islamic government. This does not necessarily



affect the relationship between Muslims and other religions within the constitution negatively but has its own weight of undeniable biases, such as the use of penal codes with Muslim backgrounds.

### **Current situation**

Although the African religious scenario cannot be generalized, it does occur that even within the legislation, there are countries in which there are flaws regarding the ability to practice spirituality freely. It is illegal, for example, to practice witchery with harmful intentions in countries such as the Central African Republic and Cameroon, even though they are home to, respectively, two and four major indigenous ethnic groups, of which correspondingly one and two have indigenous beliefs. The lack of homogenous rights indisputably troubles Christians and Muslims as well in various areas, whether it is because of forced or voluntary migration, discrimination of specific branches of religion, or disparity for other reasons.

It is imperative to mention that there are many states with laws aiming for equal standards for the beliefs existing within each territory, which is the case for the majority of the southwestern part of the continent. Albeit the great diplomacy of governments, the initiative of the state to guarantee religious rights is only a part of the solution, and it is important to take into account how the population respects this right, how much effort is put into penalizing the infliction of the law, and how effective these efforts are. Libya and the Democratic Republic of Congo,





for example, have very straightforward constitutions, which guarantee the right of faith, but struggle in keeping persecutory activities under control in rural areas.

Another tendency that can be observed is the social antipathy against lack of faith, and prohibition of apostasy and proselytizing. Although this is an aspect which is often overlooked, it affects the atheist minority within most African countries.

The issue of religious freedom has not been left unaddressed by the international community, with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), now replaced by the Human Rights Council, having passed a number of resolutions addressing this specific issue and calling for investigations, monitoring, and measures to protect religious minorities. Apart from that, this matter has been addressed by organizations such as the European Parliament and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), as well as the diplomatic efforts made by individual countries and international organizations, encompassing dialogues, consultations, and diplomatic pressure to encourage compliance with international human rights standards.

Again, it is important to highlight that there are countries which respect all forms of faith and have been working throughout the years to minimize the friction between them.

### **Guiding questions**

- What is your country's relationship towards various religions and which conflicts does that create?



- Does your country have a state religion, and how does that influence the biases of the legislation and judiciary system?
- How does your country act to keep transgressions against religious related laws under control?

### Further research

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## TOPIC B: Religious Persecution in Africa



### Historical background

Since the beginning of its history, Africa has been home to a great variety of beliefs, encompassing not only indigenous African Religions, Islam and Christianity but also a wide array of other faiths. Throughout history, different religious groups had a variety of tensions and conflicts, oftentimes resulting in persecution.

Prior to colonization, Africa was home to a myriad of indigenous religions, with beliefs and practices varying across regions and communities. While religious conflicts did happen, particularly in areas where different ethnic or tribal groups clashed, religious tolerance and the incorporation of diverse beliefs was woven into the fabric of African societies.

The colonization of Africa during the 19th and early 20th centuries greatly impacted the existing religious dynamics, as showcased for example by Christian



missionaries arriving with the objective of converting Africans to Christianity. Indigenous religious practices started to be seen as pagan or primitive, and traditional ceremonies and rituals were suppressed or completely forbidden, leading to the marginalization and sometimes persecution of those following indigenous religions.



Map of colonized Africa in 1914

<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/EMtKndtWsAAvxZR.jpg>

Islam had already spread across parts of Africa prior to colonialism, and faced great challenges during the colonial era. European powers often



marginalized or imposed restrictions on Islamic practices, with Islamic scholars who resisted colonial authority or promoted independence movements being oftentimes persecuted.

After gaining independence from their colonizers, the challenge of managing diverse religious populations was extremely present in African societies, exemplified by the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) in Kenya and the conflicts between the Marxist Derg regime and religious groups in Ethiopia. Even with many nations seeking secular governance, religious tensions and conflicts still made themselves present, sometimes politicizing religious identities and thus leading to discrimination and persecution of religious minorities.

Occasionally, conflicts between religious groups have resulted in violence. For instance, in Sudan, conflicts between the Arab-Muslim north and the predominantly Christian and animist south caused a great deal of religious persecution, mainly during the Sudanese civil wars, leading to the secession of South Sudan as an independent nation in 2011. Nigeria has also experienced periodic outbreaks of violence between Muslim and Christian communities, especially in the central and northern regions.

Of course, Africa's history is not only characterized by religious persecution. As previously mentioned, several societies on the continent have historically shown remarkable religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. While religious persecution has occurred in various forms and contexts, it does not define the entire continent's religious scenario and history or the experiences of its populations.





## Current situation

The current situation regarding religious persecution in Africa varies from country to country and region to region, considering that Africa is a vast continent with 54 countries, each unique regarding socio-political dynamics and religious landscape. Because of that, it is challenging to provide an overview of the entire continent, but some trends do tend to be recurring in certain areas.

Several countries in Africa continue to experience religious conflicts and tensions, oftentimes fueled by political, economic, and ethnic factors, with religious differences serving as a catalyst for violence. One example of this situation is the great number of casualties and displacement caused by tensions between the Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt and northeastern regions.

The rise of extremist groups that employ religious ideologies as a basis for their actions also plays a part in this scenario in several regions of the continent. Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and various factions associated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have carried out attacks targeting religious minorities, places of worship, and communities that do not align with their extremist interpretations of Islam.

In certain countries, policies restricting religious freedom and favoring certain religious groups have been implemented by local governments. These policies may include discriminatory laws, restrictions on religious practices, or the preferential treatment of one religion over others, which clearly contribute to tensions and persecution of religious minorities.



As of 2023, five African countries are described as having extreme levels of persecution in Open Doors' World Watch List for Christian persecution, with 13 others being described as having very high levels of persecution. According to Open Doors, 1 in 5 Christians are persecuted in Africa. Of course, the information available is only what was reported, with many occurrences of religious intolerance and persecution being believed to happen behind closed doors.

Indigenous African religions also continue to be practiced across the continent, often alongside Islam and Christianity. While efforts have been made to preserve and promote indigenous religious practices, they do face marginalization and stigmatization in societies that predominantly practice the Abrahamic faiths.

Concerning this issue, there have been several international actions taken, including a variety of United Nations (UN) resolutions. For instance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) itself establishes the right of religious freedom, serving as the foundation for ensuing resolutions.

The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981), the Istanbul Process (2011), and the Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 (2011) all address the issue of religious persecution, reaffirming the principles stated in the UDHR, calling for actions to prevent it and encouraging measures that seek for a broader understanding and tolerance in the religious landscape. One such action was taken with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966), which, again basing itself on the UDHR, obligates party States to uphold the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.



Considering the complexity of the current scenario, it is of utmost importance to examine each country and region individually to better understand the state of religious persecution in Africa. As of today, many African nations have constitutional provisions and legal frameworks that protect religious freedoms and promote religious pluralism. Additionally, there are several instances of peaceful coexistence, interfaith dialogue, and efforts to promote religious tolerance and harmony.

### **Timeline of events**

Until the 19th century - Africa was home to a variety of religions containing diverse beliefs and practices, with religious conflicts arising occasionally between different groups.

Late 19th to early 20th century - Africa was colonized by several European powers, which, with the mission to convert the population to Christianity, suppressed and marginalized indigenous religions, as well as imposing restrictions on Islamic practices in existing Muslim communities.

Mid-20th century - African countries gained independence from the European powers, and so new challenges and dynamics concerning religion arose.

1980s - Persecution of Christians and other non-Muslim communities in Sudan caused by religious tensions between the Arab-Muslim north and predominantly Christian and animist south.



2000s - Outbreaks of violence between Muslim and Christian communities in Nigeria, resulting in religious persecution and displacement.

2010 - Religious minorities, including Christians, started being targeted by an extremist group in Nigeria, suffering bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on places of worship.

2011 - South Sudan gained independence from Sudan, but religious tensions, which lead to violence and persecution were still present in the region.

2013 - Religious conflicts between Christian and Muslim communities, leading to violence and persecution, were experienced in the Central African Republic.

2015 - Religious persecution and displacement from Christians and other non-Muslim in Kenya groups caused by attacks by Al-Shabaab, an extremist group based in Somalia.

2016 - The Gambian government imposed restrictions on religious freedom, targeting minority religious communities and causing human rights abuses.

2019 - The Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand sparked debates on global religious tolerance, also impacting discussions related to religious persecution in Africa.



2020 - The Ethiopian conflict in the Tigray region escalated, which led to reports of religious persecution and attacks on religious sites.

2021 - Religious persecution continues in several African countries, such as Nigeria, Sudan, Cameroon, and Burkina Faso, with continuous violence targeting religious minorities.

## **Positions of major nations**

### ***Central African Republic (CAR)***

The Central African Republic has experienced religious conflicts between Christian and Muslim communities, and so their government expressed its commitment to promoting religious tolerance, reconciliation, and peace. Since its independence in 1960, the Central African Republic has faced periods of instability, particularly with the violence resulting from the clashes between the Christian anti-Balaka militias and the predominantly Muslim Seleka rebels. The country's government has made efforts to address religious violence, through initiatives such as disarmament programs and interfaith dialogues, but the situation remains a complex one, with peace and reconciliation still being an ongoing challenge.





## ***China***

China has faced criticism for its human rights record, which includes a tight control over religious practices and violations of religious freedom. The Chinese government places restrictions on religious organizations, religious practices, and religious education, while maintaining that it guarantees religious freedom. There have been reports of religious persecution, particularly against certain religious groups, such as Uighur Muslims and Falun Gong practitioners, with places of worship and religious symbols being demolished or restricted in some regions. China has implemented policies, such as "sinicization", to exert greater control over religions, aligning them with Chinese Communist Party ideology. In regions like Xinjiang, the government has conducted large-scale detention and forced labor programs targeting Uighur Muslims.

## ***Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)***

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has faced challenges related to religious tensions and conflicts involving various armed groups and militias, mainly in the eastern regions. These conflicts have had ethnic and religious dimensions, which led to violence and human rights abuses, including violations of religious freedom. As a result, efforts are being made by the government to address religious violence, promote peaceful coexistence, and protect religious freedom as well as encouraging interfaith initiatives and dialogue to foster understanding among different religious groups. Additionally, the government of the DRC has initiated disarmament programs and peace dialogues to address conflict-related violence.



### ***Egypt***

Egypt has a predominantly Muslim population, and the government plays a significant role concerning religious affairs. While Islam is the state religion, Egypt's constitution also recognizes the rights of other religious communities, such as Christians, and grants religious freedom. Nevertheless, restrictions on religious freedom and violence targeting religious minorities have been reported, as well as some discriminatory laws, which have affected religious minorities. Though Egypt has a long history of coexistence, the country has faced challenges regarding religious discrimination and tensions, with the government's control over religious affairs and its treatment of religious minorities being a point of concern. The Egyptian government has taken measures to combat extremist groups and maintain social stability, but there have been concerns about the implementation of certain laws that restrict religious activities.

### ***Eritrea***

Eritrea has faced concerns, in part from international human rights organizations, over religious freedom and maintaining human rights, with the Eritrean government being accused of restricting religious practices and persecuting religious minorities, such as Christians and minority Muslim sects. Eritrea has a history of tensions between the government and religious groups, particularly some Christian denominations that have faced restrictions and harassment. The government has a strict policy of registering religious groups



and tightly controlling religious activities., with those who practice religions not officially recognized facing persecution and imprisonment.

### ***Germany***

Germany's foreign policy agenda has as a priority religious freedom and preventing religious persecution, with its government engaging in dialogues with African countries with the objective of promoting religious tolerance and supporting initiatives aiming to address this issue. Germany has participated in international efforts to address religious persecution in Africa through diplomatic channels and multilateral forums, supporting projects and initiatives aimed at fostering interfaith dialogue and preventing religious discrimination and violence.

### ***France***

France has expressed concerns about religious persecution in Africa, particularly concerning extremism and terrorism, with its government supporting efforts to address this issue. France, as a former colonial power in Africa, maintains diplomatic relations with various African countries, addressing religious freedom concerns as part of its broader engagement on human rights and counterterrorism efforts in the region. France has collaborated with African countries and regional organizations to address security challenges and promote religious freedom, providing support for initiatives aimed at countering extremism and promoting dialogue among religious communities.



### **Libya**

Libya has faced political instability and armed conflicts, which impacted religious freedom and in turn led to incidents of religious persecution. Since the 2011 revolution that resulted in the fall of the Gaddafi regime, the country has been divided among various factions, and armed groups have vied for control, leading to insecurity and human rights abuses, including violations of religious freedom. With the ongoing political transition, the country's government expressed its commitment to establishing a state that respects religious freedom and protects religious minorities, protecting the rights of all Libyans regardless of religious beliefs. In the past, international efforts have focused on supporting the political transition in Libya and addressing the human rights situation in the country, with organizations such as the United Nations being involved in facilitating dialogues and reconciliation processes, seeking to address religious freedom and other human rights concerns.

### **Nigeria**

Nigeria is a religiously diverse country with a significant Christian population in the south and a predominantly Muslim population in the north. The country has a history of religious tensions, religious groups, coupled with other factors such as ethnic and economic disparities, which have contributed to violence, including attacks by extremist groups such as Boko Haram in the northeast. Even though the government has taken measures to address these issues, including deploying security forces and engaging in military operations to combat extremist groups and address communal violence, human rights



organizations have raised concerns about the conduct of security forces and possible human rights violations in their efforts.

### ***Somalia***

Somalia has been grappling with instability and conflict for several decades, which has led to the creation of extremist groups like Al-Shabaab, which has carried out numerous attacks on religious minorities, government officials, and civilians who don't adhere to their extremist interpretations of Islam. The country's government has been working, with support from international partners, in efforts to counter extremist ideologies and rehabilitate former combatants, aiming to promote religious tolerance, expressing its commitment to protecting religious freedom and combating religious persecution. Various international initiatives have aimed to provide support for Somalia's stabilization and development, including promoting religious tolerance and countering violent extremism.

### ***Spain***

Spain has expressed concerns about religious persecution, advocating for the protection of religious freedom globally. The Spanish government is aligned with the European Union's commitment to combat religious discrimination and violence, supporting interreligious dialogue and initiatives aiming to promote religious tolerance. The country has a long history of upholding human rights and religious freedom domestically and internationally, collaborating with EU partners to address human rights issues, including religious persecution, in Africa and





another variety of regions. Spain, along with other EU member states, has been involved in diplomatic efforts to address religious persecution and promote religious freedom, having participated in international forums and initiatives aimed at protecting religious minorities and promoting interfaith dialogue.

### ***Sudan***

Sudan has experienced issues related to religious freedom, with the country's religious landscape having undergone significant changes over the years. During the country's previous government, religious minorities, particularly Christians, faced discrimination and restrictions on their religious practices. Even so, efforts towards greater inclusivity and religious freedom have been apparent in recent political changes. With the transitional government after the ousting of former President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 working on reforming previous discriminatory laws, looking to improve the situation of religious minorities and encouraging interfaith dialogue to promote religious tolerance.

### ***United Kingdom***

The United Kingdom often stresses the importance of religious freedom in its foreign policy, which is shown in its statements and engagements with African countries, and as such has expressed concerns about religious persecution in Africa. The UK has made efforts to address the religious issues in Africa, especially by means of diplomatic channels, promoting interfaith dialogue and tolerance, as well as actively supporting projects and programs aimed at promoting religious freedom and countering religious persecution in Africa, collaborating with



international partners and regional organizations to address human rights issues, including religious freedom concerns.

### ***United States***

The United States has frequently expressed concerns about religious persecution worldwide, emphasizing religious freedom as a natural human right, and has designated certain countries in Africa, such as Nigeria and Sudan, as "Countries of Particular Concern" for their violations of religious freedom. The U.S. State Department issues annual reports on religious freedom, assessing the status of religious freedom in countries around the world, closely monitoring religious freedom violations through a number of agencies, such as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). The U.S. government has implemented targeted sanctions and diplomatic measures against countries found to be violating religious freedom, also engaging in diplomatic efforts and providing aid and support to promote religious freedom and human rights in African countries.

### **Guiding questions**

- What history does your country have with religious persecution and coexistence of religions?
- What stance has your country taken when concerning religious persecution within itself or in other countries, if any?
- Has your country made any efforts or taken any initiative concerning religious persecution?



- Is your country willing to take action if it has not done so, regarding religious conflict and discrimination?

### Further research

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