



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

CORONAVIRUS

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

The Global Response to the Coronavirus: Impact on Religious Practice and Religious Freedom

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Overview

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in December 2019, governments have begun implementing various public health interventions to control the spread of the illness. These interventions have impacted billions of people worldwide and often involve large public programs, restrictions on freedom of movement, and government management of critical resources.

It is important for governments to account for religious freedom concerns in their responses to COVID-19, for reasons of both legality and policy effectiveness. From a legal perspective, international law requires governments to preserve individual human rights, including religious freedom, when taking measures to protect public health even in times of crisis. From an efficacy perspective, considering religious freedom concerns can help build trust between governments and religious groups, who in past public health crises have played a critical role in delivering health interventions. Such concerns include the cancellation of large gatherings, among them religious activities, where viruses easily can spread.

This factsheet reviews international legal frameworks surrounding the limitation of religious freedom on the grounds of public health. It then provides illustrative examples from the current COVID-19 pandemic where religious freedom issues and public health interventions intersect. These examples may help inform ongoing discussions of public health interventions where similar conditions exist.

International Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Public Health

Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* and of *the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* are the primary international provisions securing the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) under

international human rights law. Both use similar language in providing robust protections to FoRB, and in defining the narrow circumstances under which states may lawfully limit it in furtherance of an identified state interest, including public health. Article 18(3) of the ICCPR provides that a government cannot restrict manifestations of FoRB except if the limitation (1) is prescribed by law; (2) serves one of the listed purposes, which are to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; and (3) is necessary for attaining this purpose. Unlike some other rights, FoRB may not be derogated by states in times of public emergency or war.

Under the [prevailing guidelines](#) for interpreting the ICCPR's limitation and derogation provisions, limitations are not allowed except when specific conditions are met. Such conditions require that the restrictions are: (1) not used to destroy a protected right; (2) narrowly applied only for the purpose proscribed, construed in favor of the right at issue, and rights are interpreted broadly; (3) not discriminatory in language and application, and only restrict rights for the neutral purpose of protecting citizens; and (4) not discriminatory against one religion or belief system, or between believers and non-believers, even when states maintain an official religion.

Pursuant to these guidelines, public health may be invoked to allow a state to take measures dealing with a serious threat to its population's health or that of individual members. These measures must be specifically aimed at preventing disease or injury, or providing care for the sick and injured, with "due regard" given to the [International Health Regulations of the World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#).

Specifically in relation to COVID-19, WHO [emphasized](#) that in the response to this pandemic, "[a]ll countries must strike a fine balance between protecting health, minimizing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights." In an effort to curtail the spread of the virus, WHO has provided a variety of technical resources, including [guidelines](#) and [planning recommendations for mass gatherings](#) to aid authorities in mitigating the public health risks of large events, including religious services. Echoing the need to respect human rights, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet also [stressed](#) that "human dignity and rights need to be front and [center]" in the effort to contain and combat the spread of COVID-19. She further noted that these efforts must be "in strict accordance with

human rights standards and in a way that is necessary and proportionate to the evaluated risk." UN Experts also [emphasized](#) that restrictions must be based on public health concerns and not used "simply to quash dissent" or target particular groups, minorities, or individuals. Non-governmental organizations have also raised [concerns](#) regarding the [potential human rights implications](#) of the COVID-19 response.

Countries Where the Government or Societal Response to COVID-19 Is Impacting Freedom of Religion

China

The first case of the COVID-19 was reported in early December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The local government was widely [criticized](#) for its slow response and for censoring information about the outbreak. The national government has since imposed strict quarantine measures, locking down Wuhan and three other Chinese cities, and using its surveillance apparatus to monitor potentially sick citizens. China was the initial epicenter of the virus, with more than 80,000 cases and 3,000 deaths as of March 2020.

Human rights advocates are concerned that COVID-19 — and the government's response — risk exacerbating ongoing religious freedom violations. As noted in USCIRF's [2019 Annual Report](#), the Chinese government has detained more than 1 million Uighur and other Muslims in concentration camps in Xinjiang since April 2017. The combination of limited access to medical resources and large concentrations of elderly detainees could lead to a humanitarian disaster if the virus reaches any of those camps. In addition, there are [reports](#) that authorities have forced Uighurs to work in factories throughout the country to compensate for decreased output during the quarantine. In January, authorities quarantined millions of people across Xinjiang without advance warning. There are [reports](#) that some Uighur residents in the city of Ghulja have limited access to food and local officials have demanded payments in order to bring supplies.

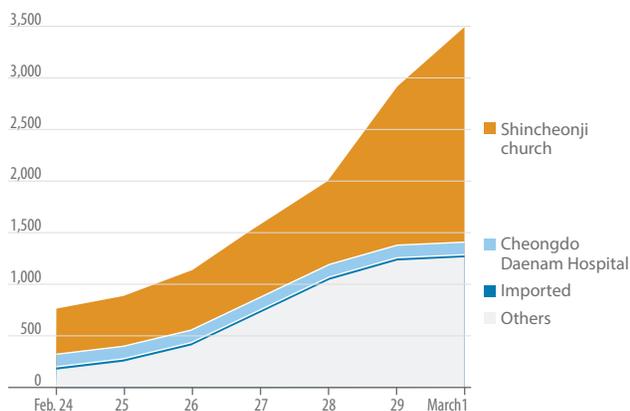
South Korea

South Korea provides a vivid example of how public health emergencies can increase the risk to marginalized religious groups. Even before the recent coronavirus outbreak, members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus had reported facing pressure from mainstream Protestant groups, and in some cases being [subjected](#) to deprogramming. The

Shincheonji church has a reputation for secrecy, to the extent that some members do not reveal their religious affiliation to family or friends—a precaution members claim is necessary because of the hostility they face. The church claims more than 300,000 members worldwide in more than 20 countries, including in Wuhan, China.

In early February, a 61-year-old female member of the Shincheonji—designated Patient 31—[developed](#) a fever, but attended church services in the city of Daegu before being diagnosed. According to the [Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(KCDC\)](#), approximately two-thirds of the more than 7,500 cases could be traced to her, leading to a surge of infections amongst Shincheonji members.

Confirmed cases, by cluster



Source: Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

South Korean authorities asked the Shincheonji church for a list of all members. Church leaders publicly offered assurances that they would comply, but some South Korean news outlets accused the church of privately instructing members to lie about their affiliation if contacted. The church did provide a list of 212,000 members and stopped all meetings within days of Patient 31's diagnosis, but the omission of tens of thousands of students from the initial list raised [suspicions](#); the church quickly corrected the error, noting that omitted students were not yet full members. Church leaders also encouraged members to reveal their affiliation to coworkers and employers. On March 2, Shincheonji founder Lee Man-hee publicly apologized for any inadvertent role the church might have played in spreading the disease.

The Shincheonji church has faced considerable criticism and even harassment from the South Korean government and society. Although some government measures appeared to be driven by legitimate public health

concerns, others appeared to exaggerate the church's role in the outbreak. The government of Seoul [locked down](#) Shincheonji churches in the capital, and some mainline Protestant groups have [accused](#) the church of deliberately spreading the disease. Local prosecutors are [investigating](#) criminal charges against Lee Man-hee for homicide by "willful negligence." USCIRF has received reports of individuals encountering discrimination at work and spousal abuse because of their affiliation with the church. Meanwhile, a [petition](#) to ban the church has received more than 1.2 million signatures. Despite this, Vice Minister of Health Kim Kang-lip has publicly [stated](#) that the Shincheonji church has cooperated with authorities and that punitive measures against church members could complicate efforts to contain the outbreak.

Iran

Iran has suffered [significantly more cases](#) of [COVID-19](#) than other countries in the Middle East. As the home of several major Shi'a shrines as well as the Qom and Mashhad *hawzas* (seminaries), Iran is visited by many people who travel to and from the country for pilgrimage or to study. As a result, in the wake of the virus' spread, several countries have imposed travel restrictions to and from Iran, which has limited these religious activities. Iran's lack of sufficient medical resources has exacerbated the spread of the virus, which has reached [members of Iran's government](#). On March 2, 2020, Mohammed Mirmohammadi, a member of Iran's Expediency Council, [died](#) following a COVID-19 infection. Iran's government [blocked](#) access to the website Wikipedia following Mirmohammadi's death, and it has also disrupted internet access in Qom.

Cities with major religious sites, including Qom, have been among the hardest hit. However some clerics, [along with](#) the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), were [reluctant](#) to agree to government-imposed quarantines and close religious sites. Videos have circulated on social media of individuals [licking shrines](#) in Qom and Mashhad to protest pressure to temporarily close them. A man in Mashhad was [arrested](#) on February 29 for licking a religious shrine.

Iran has long imprisoned hundreds of people who are members of religious minority groups. Activists have expressed [concern](#) that prison authorities are not taking sufficient precautions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, which has already appeared in [Evin, Urmia, and Ghazalhesar](#) prisons. On March 3, Iran [announced](#) it would release 54,000 prisoners on furlough, and it later

released a total of [70,000](#). However, 16 Sufi prisoners at Great Tehran Penitentiary (GTP) reportedly were moved to a ward with known cases of COVID-19, and 8 Sufis from Evin prison were moved to the same ward within GTP. Additionally, eight Sufis in Ghazalhasar Prison were moved to an overcrowded ward at that prison where they are at an increased risk of contracting the virus.

Despite the threat of COVID-19, Iran initially delayed the country-wide closure of schools. In protest, girls at a Tehran school [recorded a video](#) of themselves in an empty classroom doing a dance implying they were dying from coronavirus, and asked a prominent Iranian-American activist to post the video on social media. Women and girls in Iran have been [arrested](#) for [posting videos](#) of themselves dancing on the grounds that it “breaks moral norms.”

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia announced its [first case](#) of coronavirus on March 2, 2020, but had been preparing for the virus well beforehand. On February 26, the kingdom [banned foreigners](#) from traveling to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina over fears it would exacerbate the spread of the virus. The government [set up](#) an online portal where those who had paid for pilgrimage visas could obtain refunds. On March 5, it temporarily closed the Grand Mosque in Mecca for disinfecting and [restricted](#) entry afterwards.

On March 8, 2020, Saudi Arabia [suspended](#) entry and exit from Qatif province, where the first 11 cases of COVID-19 in the kingdom originated. Qatif is a predominantly Shi’a Muslim province, and the Saudi government contends that individuals traveling from Iran, which has experienced a high number of cases, may have brought the virus back with them. Iran is home to several Shi’a religious pilgrimage sites, so the quarantine around Qatif stands to limit this particular element of Shi’a religious practice.

United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has reported more than [85 cases](#) of COVID-19 and has used state authority to restrict religious gatherings. The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments in Sharjah [directed](#) churches to suspend children’s Bible classes and ban children from all church activities. It also banned religious lectures and sermons, but allowed individual prayers. The Orthodox and [Catholic](#) churches took steps to [increase sanitation](#) and limit personal contact during religious rituals. The UAE also limited Friday prayers in mosques to 15 minutes and limited weekday prayers even further. The governmental Shari’a Ifta Council [issued a fatwa](#) in early

March prohibiting those infected with COVID-19 from attending prayers. The Ministry of Health and Prevention also suspended classes at Qur’an learning centers to clean the buildings and ordered mosques to do so as well. Hindu temples [restricted](#) ceremonial events and canceled Holi celebrations in early March, and the Sikh community [installed](#) thermal scanners at the Gurunanak Darbar in Jebel Ali and increased sanitation measures there.

Italy and The Vatican

As of the beginning of March, the worst outbreak of the coronavirus outside Asia has emerged in [Italy](#). In response, the Italian government [issued](#) a quarantine of impacted regions and mandated the closure of schools, museums, theaters, and other public gatherings, including [religious services](#). In compliance with those regulations, several Italian dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church [canceled](#) public Masses and suspended Ash Wednesday services. Around the northern city of Milan, worshippers are only allowed to visit churches for private prayer and cannot sit together in large groups. While some churches have broadcasted their services, some religious leaders have questioned the need to cease religious services and [asked](#) regional governments to allow the celebration of Mass. In Milan—home to around 7,000 Jews, the largest number in Italy after Rome—Jewish community institutions such as synagogues and schools have suspended their [operations](#).

The Diocese of Rome, outside the quarantine zone, also [issued](#) measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including the omission of the “sign of peace,” which traditionally includes personal contact such as a handshake or kiss. In response to the Italian government’s recommendation to cease large public gatherings, the Vatican has begun to offer [meditations online](#). On March 8, the Vatican [announced](#) the suspension of all public Masses and liturgical celebrations until the beginning of April. The Vatican plans to live stream the Pope’s general audience during this time.

Georgia

Just over 83 percent of Georgia’s population is part of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and that country has [reported](#) more than 20 cases of COVID-19. In March 2020, Georgia’s National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) [instructed](#) the Georgian Orthodox Church to take preventative measures to limit the spread of COVID-19. While the church invited the NCDC to disinfect church buildings in order to slow the spread of the virus, it continued to use a shared spoon to conduct holy communion rituals, worrying public health officials.



Tajikistan

Tajikistan's government has taken preemptive measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, and had no reported cases through early March 2020. In early March, the semiofficial Council of Ulema of the Islamic Center of Tajikistan issued a [*fatwa calling*](#) on clergy to close mosques in the country. Tajikistan also canceled public celebrations of the Nowruz holiday citing public health concerns.

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