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FCO – UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Human Rights and Democracy: the 2018 Foreign and Commonwealth Office report

Preface by Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt

Three decades ago, the world stood on the brink of the fastest advance of human rights and democracy in modern times. During the annus mirabilis of 1989, the Iron Curtain crumbled before our eyes and six European countries seized their liberty.

At that moment, it seemed possible that democracy and liberal values would sweep the world. Sure enough, another eleven countries would escape from dictatorship by 1999.

But from the vantage point of today, we know the optimism of that era was misplaced. Since the turn of the millennium, the worldwide advance of human rights and democracy has slowed and, in some respects, gone into reverse. Freedom House reported that 2018 was the 13th consecutive year of “global declines in political rights and civil liberties”.

All this makes it even more important for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to strive to uphold the values that define our country. Since becoming Foreign Secretary, I have launched a campaign to defend media freedom and a review of the [FCO \(Foreign and Commonwealth Office\)](#)’s support for Christians who suffer persecution because of their faith.

If there is one essential quality of an open society, it is the freedom of journalists to hold the powerful to account without fear of retribution. Yet the overall picture is bleak. In 2018, no less than 99 journalists were murdered around the world, according to the United Nations. Another 348 were jailed by governments and 60 taken hostage by non-state groups.

In summer 2019, I will join my Canadian counterpart to host an international conference in London on media freedom. We have decided that democratic countries need to stand together to make it a taboo to murder, arrest or detain journalists just for doing their jobs.

Our aim is to shine a spotlight on abuses and raise the price for those who would act to silence the media. We can only achieve this if countries with shared values work together.

I was deeply disturbed to learn that 215 million Christians faced persecution in 2018, according to a study by the campaign group Open Doors. Christians faced harassment in 144 countries in 2016, according to the Pew Research Centre, compared with 128 in 2015.

I am not convinced that our efforts have always been commensurate with the scale of the problem or the empirical evidence that Christians often endure the greatest burden of persecution. We must never allow a misguided sense of political correctness to inhibit our response.

So I have asked Rt Rev’d Philip Mounstephen, the Anglican Bishop of Truro, to conduct an independent review of the [FCO \(Foreign and Commonwealth Office\)](#)’s efforts to help persecuted Christians and report back to me in 2019.

In this report, you will learn about the [FCO \(Foreign and Commonwealth Office\)](#)’s efforts to promote human rights and democracy in 2018. You will read of the countries where we have particular concerns.

In an imperfect world, we will not always be able to respond identically to the same abuses in different settings. But protecting human rights and safeguarding Britain’s national values are not optional extras for the [FCO \(Foreign and Commonwealth Office\)](#). They are part of who we are.

I am determined that British diplomacy will continue to uphold the principles of humanity and fairness that our country has always stood for.

Foreword by Minister for Human Rights Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict

Human rights matter because it is only when our rights are respected that each of us has the freedom to make the most of our talents and our industry.

I work with a committed team of ministers, officials and diplomats across the globe, all determined to extend that freedom and champion the rights of people, no matter where they live or who they are, or what their belief.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on human rights in selected countries in 2018 (see Chapter 5 for individual country chapters)



Countries:

Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Congo, Democratic Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Korea, Democratic People’s Republic, Libya, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen, Zimbabwe

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attacked and pepper sprayed by the police. An opposition-aligned channel suspended broadcasting temporarily in February, when the police refused to offer protection to journalists who were threatened.

Women continued to be underrepresented in public life. Social attitudes, poor facilities, and geographic isolation contributed to limited education opportunities for girls, particularly in more remote islands. While primary education levels were generally balanced, there were 112 boys in secondary education for every 100 girls.

During 2018, Maldivian ministers repeated their intention to resume implementing the death penalty. In December, the new government voted against a UN (United Nations) General Assembly resolution in support of a moratorium on the death penalty.

The UK funded a number of small capacity-building projects focusing on human rights, gender equality, and building election-monitoring capability in civil society. We worked with the United Nations Population Fund to encourage public debate about gender issues, and to increase the visibility of and recognition for young Maldivian women leaders willing to make Sustainable Development Goals a reality. We supported a workshop which brought together Maldivian journalists and civil society to network and share experiences with their regional counterparts, who had faced similar challenges on media freedom in the past.

The new president was sworn in to office on 17 November, and published an ambitious ‘100 day agenda’ which included some important human rights commitments, such as freeing all political prisoners, submitting a Child Rights Protection Act to parliament, and rejoining the Commonwealth, which Maldives left in 2016.

In 2019, the UK will work with international partners to strengthen democratic institutions, weakened under the previous government, with a particular focus on parliament, the judiciary, and media. We will also open an Embassy in Malé, which will significantly improve our ability to support human rights work.

Pakistan

The main human rights concerns in Pakistan in 2018 were restrictions on freedom of expression and on civil society, intolerance towards and discrimination against members of religious and other minorities, failure to uphold women and children's rights, the prevalence of bonded labour, and the continued imposition and use of the death penalty. There were positive developments, including strengthened laws aimed at protecting transgender persons, and at tackling human trafficking. More remained to be done to ensure full and effective implementation of human rights legislation.

Elections in July marked an unprecedented second successive transfer of power from one full-term civilian government to another. New legislation made improvements to the process, incorporating recommendations from the observers of the 2013 elections. However, a number of terrorist attacks sought to disrupt voting, including one of the deadliest attacks in Pakistan's history in Mastung, Balochistan on 13 July, which killed 150 people.

Freedom of expression and the ability of civil society to operate came under increased pressure. Press freedom was repeatedly challenged, including through reports of the intimidation of journalists. Reports of enforced disappearances of human rights defenders, journalists, and others continued. In October, 18 international NGOs were instructed by the Government of Pakistan to leave the country, having not been granted registration under a process introduced in 2015.

Allegations of discrimination and violence against members of religious minorities continued, especially against Ahmadiyya Muslims and Christians, but also against Hindus, Sikhs and Shia Muslims. Misuse of the blasphemy laws was frequent. In October, the Supreme Court acquitted Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who had been convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death in 2010. There were recurrent reports of forced conversions to Islam and forced marriages to Muslim men of Hindu and Christian women. In May, an Ahmadi mosque in Sialkot was damaged by anti-Ahmadiyya protestors. The election law, which places members of minorities on a segregated voter list, continued to act as a barrier to Ahmadi Muslim voters participating freely in elections. In a positive step, the Pakistan and India governments opened the Kartarpur Corridor in November, allowing pilgrims to access Sikh holy sites in both India and Pakistan.

In Pakistan, discrimination and violence against women and girls remained common. Pakistan ranked 148th out of 149 countries cited in the World Economic Forum 2018 Gender Gap Index, with a female literacy rate at just 44%. Despite stronger laws to protect women from violence, including from ‘honour killings’, enforcement remained weak.

Modern slavery, including bonded and child labour, continued to be a major problem. The Global Slavery Index 2018 estimated that over three million people were living in modern slavery in Pakistan. In May, the National Assembly passed anti-trafficking legislation. UK expert advice helped strengthen the legislation to protect vulnerable members of society from exploitation.

Pakistan retained the death penalty for 27 separate offences. Particular concerns remained over prisoners with mental and physical illnesses on death row. In February, the National Assembly passed the Juvenile Justice System Act, strengthening the safeguards against minors being tried as adults.

The use of military courts to try terrorism suspects continued. These courts lack transparency and are not subject to independent scrutiny, making it difficult to assess their compliance with international standards. There were ongoing reports of the detention of prisoners without trial, and of extrajudicial killings by the security forces.

In May, the National Assembly passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, banning discrimination based solely on sexual identity and expression. The government also committed to providing medical facilities, psychological care, and adult education to the transgender population. However, homosexuality remained a crime, and lesbian and gay persons continued to face discrimination and the threat of violence.

In 2018, the UK continued to urge Pakistan to improve the human rights situation for all its citizens. We engaged with the government, parliamentarians, and civil society across the full range of human rights issues, including freedom of religion or belief, modern slavery, freedom of expression, and abolishing the death penalty. British ministers raised concerns about the rights of people belonging to minorities and modern slavery with the government at a senior level. UK support facilitated the registration of 405,000 women voters. Projects supported by the Global Britain Fund sought to improve citizens' awareness of their constitutional rights and tolerance of diversity. Online animations reached an audience of 45 million, alongside classroom-based workshops in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces.

UK aid continued to support the Pakistan government in making education more inclusive, including supporting the enrolment of children with disabilities, encouraging the promotion of tolerance, inclusion, and respect for minorities, and improving education outcomes for girls. New interventions were launched with government and local communities to promote the rights of children, young people, women, and members of religious minorities and excluded groups. These helped members of these groups strengthen their control over their own development.

Following the elections, the new Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government committed to establishing institutions for the protection of minorities, tackling inequality, and guaranteeing press freedoms. The Ministry of Human Rights, headed by Dr Shireen Mazar, began work on a range of legislation, relating related to the rights of members of minorities and of people with disabilities, the protection of children from abuse, improved access to justice, and protection against torture.

In 2019, we will support projects to improve awareness of modern slavery, and to promote religious tolerance and diversity. Our Conflict, Stability and Security Fund will continue to help strengthen democracy and human rights institutions, and to support the justice system become more accountable to citizens. We will continue to encourage Pakistan to take the necessary steps towards meeting its international obligations on human and labour rights in full, in line with its commitments under the EU Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus framework.

Russia

The human rights situation in Russia continued to deteriorate in 2018, with abuses of human rights recorded across the country. Freedom of assembly, religion or belief, and expression came under particular attack.

Protest activity continued, linked to domestic economic issues and non-democratic elections. The authorities responded by further reducing space for protest, including widespread violations of the right to freedom of assembly. The presidential elections in March saw a coordinated campaign of harassment targeting opposition activists. During September's regional elections, 1,018 people were arrested while protesting against pension reforms.

The use of vague 'extremism' laws to crack down on independent media and voices critical of the Russian government affected many ordinary Russians. There were regular reports of citizens being arrested or detained for 'extremism' simply for exercising their right to freedom of speech. Space for freedom of religion or belief was constricted further. Jehovah's Witnesses in particular faced further persecution following their designation in 2017 as an 'extremist organisation'.

The Russian LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community continued to face a hostile environment. Russia failed to conduct a credible investigation into the detention, torture, and reported killings of homosexual men in Chechnya in 2017. The UK was one of 16 states to invoke the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Moscow Mechanism in November, setting up an independent investigation, but Russia refused to co-operate. The UK publicly called for international human rights standards to be upheld, and for an end to discrimination against LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people.

The operating environment for NGOs in Russia continued to be extremely challenging. Oyub Titiev, head of the Chechnya division of the human rights NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) Memorial, faced long-term detention on drug charges which were widely acknowledged as politically motivated. The Minister for Europe and the Americas, Sir Alan Duncan, issued a statement on 18 January pressing the Chechen authorities to ensure Mr Titiev's safety and his right to a fair trial.

There were numerous reports of torture in prisons and detention centres, attracting an unusual degree of criticism domestically. A Russian investigation was set up to assess treatment of prisoners across the country. Nonetheless, a Russian journalist who released a video of one of the worst examples of torture was forced to flee Russia following harassment.