

# INDIA 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion; mandates a secular state; requires the state to treat all religions impartially; and prohibits discrimination based on religion. It also states citizens must practice their faith in a way that does not adversely affect public order, morality, or health. Ten of 28 states have laws restricting religious conversions for all faiths. Some of these states also impose penalties specifically against forced religious conversions for the purpose of marriage.

During the year, some members of religious minority groups challenged the government's ability and willingness to protect them from violence, investigate crimes against members of religious minority groups, and protect their freedom of religion or belief. In February, a crowd of 20,000 Christians gathered in New Delhi to protest increasing violence against them and request greater protections for the Christian community. In March, a group of 93 former senior civil servants wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressing concerns regarding "continued harassment" of Christians in particular by government officials and political party leaders associated with the government. Christians and Muslims were arrested under laws banning forced religious conversions, which religious groups said in some cases were used to harass and imprison members of religious minority groups on false and fabricated charges or for lawful religious practices. In some cases, Christian groups said local police aided mobs that disrupted worship services over accusations of conversion

activities or stood by while mobs attacked Christians and then arrested the victims on conversion charges.

In December, Parliament approved new criminal laws that included provisions to criminalize making false promises and concealing one's identity to sexually exploit a woman, including for marriage. Media commentators said the new laws could be used to punish Muslim men purportedly seeking to marry non-Muslim women to convert them to Islam. Opponents said the new laws were unnecessary and the strict penalties were out of line with lighter penalties given for more serious offenses. Prime Minister Modi reiterated calls to enact a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) at the national level as called for in the constitution instead of a system of separate personal laws for religious communities. Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and tribal leaders and some state government officials opposed the initiative on the grounds it was part of a project to turn the country into a "Hindu Rashtra" (a Hindu Nation). Some UCC proponents, including opposition politicians, said a UCC would promote greater equality, including for women, by preventing polygamy or inequitable inheritance within personal religious laws.

Some government and political officials made comments and took actions in support of religious tolerance during the year. In April, Christian leaders welcomed Prime Minister Modi's visit to the Sacred Heart Cathedral in New Delhi, which many in the Christian community stated they viewed as a gesture of solidarity. During his state visit to the United States in June, Prime Minister Modi said, "regardless of caste, creed, religion, gender – there is absolutely no space for any discrimination [in my government]." In December, Prime Minister Modi hosted approximately 100 Christian representatives from different denominations at his official residence and praised the contributions of the country's Christians, but more than 3,200 individuals from the Christian community dissociated themselves from the

meeting, citing growing anti-minority attacks and anti-minority hate speech by certain government officials. In April, President Droupadi Murmu met with a Christian delegation to discuss attacks against Christians in the country. In April, the government published a research paper that said there was no evidence of religious discrimination in the government's provision of public services. In September, the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) met with Christian leaders and said it would address cases of persecution of Christians.

International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), however, stated that the "actions and statements by members and supporters of his (Modi's) BJP party [Bharatiya Janata Party] contradicted" government officials' positive statements. They further stated that the government should investigate and prosecute those responsible for carrying out violence against members of minority groups.

The National Crimes Record Bureau reported 272 instances of communal violence in 2022 compared with 378 in 2021 (most recent data). Attacks on members of religious minority groups, including killings, assaults, and intimidation, occurred in various states throughout the year, including cases of "cow vigilantism" based on allegations that Muslim men were participating in cow slaughter or trade in beef. There were also attacks on religious leaders, disruption of Christian and Muslim worship services, vandalism of religious minorities' houses of worship, and violence between religious groups. Islamic groups in Jammu and Kashmir also reportedly attacked non-Muslims during the year.

In December, the United Christian Forum (UCF) reported 731 attacks on Christians in the year, compared with 599 such incidents in 2022. The UCF data by state showed the most incidents in Uttar Pradesh (301) and

Chhattisgarh (152). In April, the government told the Supreme Court said that the UCF exaggerated claims of attacks against Christians to create a false narrative. In July, the UCF's national coordinator said, "The government data (on violence against Christians) downplays the severity of the situation."

During violence in Manipur that started on May 3 between minority Christian Kuki and majority Hindu Meitei ethnic groups, Hindu and Christian places of worship were destroyed, as well as two synagogues of the small Bnei Menashe Jewish community. The Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum and international media said that at least 253 churches were burned down, more than 200 persons were killed and more than 60,000 displaced due to the violence. Most of the attacks against religious sites were reported to have taken place in the first few days of the conflict, when the interethnic violence was at its peak; the eventual deployment of security forces reduced widespread violence although incidences of violence continued through the end of the year. Because religion and ethnicity were closely linked in this clash, it was difficult to categorize specific acts of violence as being solely based on religious identity, but there were some reports of Meitei Hindus attacking churches that served Meitei Christians, who also reportedly faced pressure to convert from Christianity. One local Meitei Christian leader said that the Meitei Christians had been "attacked from both sides." The Supreme Court criticized the failure of the central government and the Manipur state government to halt the violence especially in the early stages of the conflict, and appointed officials to investigate incidents of violence, ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and rebuild homes and places of worship.

Public celebrations of Hindu festivals sometimes resulted in communal violence, particularly when they included processions through Muslim-

majority areas. Media and NGOs reported that these processions were led by the BJP and affiliated Hindu nationalist groups, including Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). In communal violence in several states, including West Bengal, Bihar, and Haryana nine persons were killed, dozens injured, and mosques, a madrassah and other buildings destroyed or damaged. Police arrested several hundred persons in connection with the violence, according to NGOs and local sources. In Haryana, authorities demolished 1,208 structures in the area where there was communal violence, with civil society organizations and international NGOs accusing authorities of largely targeting Muslim homes and shops. A state official said the structures belonged to persons arrested in the violence, and that the buildings were used by rioters or were encroaching on government land. The Punjab and Haryana High Court subsequently ordered authorities to halt the demolitions and the Supreme Court also condemned hate speech and calls for economic boycotts against the Muslim community. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation expressed “deep concern” regarding violence and vandalism against Muslims in several states, which it said reflected “systemic targeting of the Muslim community in India.”

Some public figures made remarks that members of religious minority groups and Hindus said were inflammatory. Christians and Muslims in the Bastar area of Chhattisgarh petitioned local authorities to take action against local leaders of the BJP, the VHP, and other organizations that called for an embargo of Christian and Muslim businesses at a rally on April 10. Following the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, international media reported “a flood of disinformation” on social media purporting that the country was threatened by its Muslim population, particularly in Muslim-majority areas. In October, speakers at a conference organized by the Hindu nationalist umbrella organization Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS) said Hindus

were “raising their voice(s) against the injustice they face” because they were being “targeted” by other groups with charges of making hate speech around the country.

In a joint statement during Prime Minister Modi’s state visit to Washington in June, the U.S. and Indian governments reaffirmed “their shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights, inclusion, pluralism, and equal opportunities for all citizens.”

During the year, senior U.S. officials continued to raise concerns about religious freedom issues with their Indian counterparts. During his visit in April, the Secretary of State also discussed developments in religious freedom with women leaders. In July, the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights met with civil society organizations and underscored the U.S. commitment to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. Throughout the year, the Ambassador, embassy, and consulate officials, the Assistant Secretary of State and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, and other official U.S. visitors engaged with government officials and members of religious communities, including representatives of the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh faiths, to discuss the importance of religious freedom and pluralism, the value of interfaith dialogue, and the operating environment for faith-based organizations.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the country is 1.4 billion (mid-year 2023). According to the 2011 national census, the most recent year for which disaggregated figures are available, Hindus constitute 79.8 percent of the population; Muslims, 14.2 percent; Christians, 2.3

percent; and Sikhs, 1.7 percent. The World Religion Database estimates the religious group breakdown in 2020 as Hindus, 72.5 percent; Muslims, 14.5 percent; Christians, 4.9 percent; Sikhs, 1.8 percent; and agnostics, 1.2 percent. From the 2011 census, groups that together constitute fewer than 2 percent of the population include Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians (Parsis), Jews, and Baha'is. In government statistics, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs officially identifies as Hindu more than 104 million members of Scheduled Tribes – Indigenous groups historically outside the caste system who often practice Indigenous religious beliefs – although an estimated 10 million of those listed as Scheduled Tribe members are Christians according to the 2011 census.

According to government estimates, there are significant Muslim populations in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala, Assam, and the Union Territories of Lakshadweep and Jammu and Kashmir. In Lakshadweep and Jammu and Kashmir, Muslims account for 93 percent and 68.3 percent of the population, respectively. Slightly more than 85 percent of Muslims are Sunni, with the remainder mostly Shia. According to media reports, there are an estimated 150,000 Ahmadi Muslims in the country. According to government estimates, Christian populations are distributed throughout the country but in greater concentrations in the northeast as well as in the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa. Three northeastern states have majority Christian populations: Nagaland (90 percent), Mizoram (87 percent), and Meghalaya (70 percent). Sikhs constitute 54 percent of the population of Punjab. The Dalai Lama's office states there are significant resettled Tibetan Buddhist communities in Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, and Uttarakhand States, and Delhi. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and media reports, there are approximately 100,000 Tibetan Buddhists in the country. According to

media reports, approximately 40,000 Muslim Rohingya refugees from Burma live in the country.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution mandates a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals to profess, practice, and propagate religion freely, subject to considerations of public order, morality, and health. It prohibits government discrimination based on religion, including for employment, as well as religiously based restrictions on access to public or private establishments. The constitution states that religious groups have the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes, manage their own affairs in religious matters, and own, acquire, and administer property. It prohibits the use of public funds to support any religion. National and state laws make freedom of religion or belief subject to public order, morality, and health. The constitution stipulates that the state shall endeavor to create a uniform civil code applicable to members of all religions across the country.

Federal law empowers the government to ban religious organizations that “provoke intercommunal tensions or are involved in terrorism or sedition.”

Ten of the country’s 28 states –Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh – have laws restricting religious conversion by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement, fraud, or marriage (done for the sole purpose of unlawful conversion).

Under these anticonversion laws, prohibited forms of religious allurement for conversion include the provision of gifts, promises of a better life, free education, and other standard charitable activities. These laws also bar individuals from abetting such conversions. The laws in those 10 states also require individuals wishing to convert to another religion and clergy intending to officiate at a conversion ceremony to submit formal notification to the state government for public notice, and this reporting requirement has reportedly been applied to rites such as baptisms. The notification procedures require state police to determine if there are objections to the conversion. For many of these laws, the burden of proof to demonstrate that a religious conversion was not affected through misrepresentation, force, coercion, or other prohibited manner lies on the person accused of the conversion, rather than the accuser.

Violators of anticonversion laws are subject to imprisonment or fines. In Chhattisgarh, for example, violators may face sentences of up to three years; in Madhya Pradesh, up to four years if the converts are children, women, or members of Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes; in Karnataka, up to five years. Gujarat mandates prior permission from the district magistrate for any form of conversion and punishes “forced” conversions with up to three years in prison and a fine of up to 50,000 rupees (\$600). Gujarat imposes the same fine and between three and 10 years in prison for forcible or fraudulent religious conversions through marriage. Haryana imposes one to five years in prison and a fine of not less than 100,000 rupees (\$1,200) for “forced” religious conversions and three to 10 years in prison and a fine of not less than 300,000 rupees (\$3,600) if the conversion is carried out through marriage. Haryana law also specifies that any marriages found to be carried out for the purpose of religious conversion shall be annulled. In Himachal Pradesh, penalties for “forced” or fraudulent

religious conversion of any kind include up to two years' imprisonment, fines of 25,000 rupees (\$300), or both. Uttarakhand sentences those convicted of mass conversions (defined as involving one or two persons) up to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to 50,000 rupees (\$600). Uttarakhand also sentences violators to up to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to 25,000 rupees (\$300) for forcibly converting a member of the Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes.

Under the laws of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, authorities may prohibit proselytizing near any place of worship. Punishment for violations may include imprisonment for up to three years and fines of up to 5,000 rupees (\$60). The laws in those states also ban the propagation or practice of any non-Hindu religion in localities designated as "temple towns" because of the number of significant Hindu temples located in those areas. Karnataka's anticonversion law allows for imprisonment of three to five years and a fine of up to 25,000 rupees (\$300) in the case of proselytizing persons from general categories and imprisonment of three to 10 years and a fine of up to 50,000 rupees (\$600) for forcibly converting children, women and persons from the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities.

Although there is no specific mention of hate speech in the law, the federal penal code criminalizes "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion" and "acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony," including acts causing injury or harm to religious groups and their members. The penal code also prohibits "deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs." Violations of any of these provisions are punishable by imprisonment for up to three years, a fine, or both. If the offense is committed at a place of worship, imprisonment may be for up to five years.

The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) requires religious groups and other NGOs that receive foreign funding to be licensed by the Ministry of Home Affairs before accepting or transferring foreign funds. This license must be renewed every five years. Federal law further requires NGOs that are registered under the law, including religious organizations, to maintain audit reports for their accounts and a schedule of their activities and to provide these to state government officials upon request. The central government may reject a license application or a request to transfer funds if it judges the recipient to be acting against “harmony between religious, racial, social, linguistic, or regional groups, castes, or communities.”

The FCRA requires that NGOs, including religious organizations, use no more than 20 percent of their funding for administrative purposes and are prohibited from transferring foreign funds to any other organization or individual, limitations that many NGOs stated they found challenging to maintain their operations.

The constitution states any legal reference to Hindus is to be construed to include followers of Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism, meaning they are subject to laws regarding Hindus, such as the Hindu Marriage Act.

Subsequent legislation continues to use the word Hindu as a category that includes Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Jains, but it identifies the groups as separate religions whose followers are included under the law.

Federal law provides official minority status to six religious groups: Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Jains, and Buddhists. State governments may grant minority status under state law to religious groups that are minorities in a particular region. Members of recognized minority groups are eligible for government assistance programs. The constitution states that the

government is responsible for protecting minorities and enabling them to preserve their culture.

The constitution stipulates that the state shall endeavor to create a uniform civil code applicable to members of all religions across the country, but various personal laws, instead of a uniform civil code, apply to members of different religious communities in matters of marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance based on religion, faith, and culture. Examples include the Hindu Marriage Act, the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act, and the Indian Christian Marriages Act. Such Hindu, Christian, Parsi, Jewish, and Islamic personal status laws are legally recognized, judicially enforceable, and cover 98 percent of the population. Personal status issues that are not defined for a community in a separate law are covered under Hindu personal status laws. These laws generally do not supersede national and state legislation or constitutional provisions. Some personal status laws, however, exist in violation of national or state legislation, such as the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act of 1937 which sanctifies polygamy, denies alimony to divorced women, and provides female relatives less inheritance than male relatives. Some personal status laws have been challenged in court, but these cases are rare. The government grants autonomy to the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) and the Parsi community to define their customary practices. If law boards or community leaders are not able to resolve disputes, cases are referred to the civil courts.

All couples marrying in a civil ceremony, which often includes interfaith couples, are generally required to provide public notice 30 days in advance – including addresses, photographs, and religious affiliation – for public comment, although this requirement varies by state. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jains who marry outside their religions face the

possibility of losing their property inheritance rights under the personal status laws pertaining to those communities.

The law recognizes the registration of Sikh marriages but does not include divorce provisions for Sikhs. Divorce and other Sikh personal status matters fall under Hindu codes. Under the law, any person, irrespective of religion, may seek a divorce in civil court.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in government schools. The law permits religious instruction in private religious schools. The law permits some Muslim, Christian, Sindhi (Hindu refugees), Parsi, and Sikh educational institutions that receive government support to set quotas for students belonging to the religious minority in question. For example, Aligarh Muslim University must admit at least 50 percent Muslims. St. Stephen's College in New Delhi and St. Xavier's in Mumbai must admit at least 50 percent Christians.

Twenty-five of the 28 states apply partial to full restrictions on bovine slaughter. Penalties vary among states and may vary based on whether the animal is a cow, calf, bull, or ox. The ban mostly affects Muslims and members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes that traditionally consume beef or handle, transport, and slaughter cattle. In most of the states where bovine slaughter is banned, penalties include imprisonment for six months to two years and a fine of 1,000 to 10,000 rupees (\$12 to \$120). In Assam, penalties include minimum imprisonment of three years or a fine of between 300,000 and 500,000 rupees (\$3,600 to \$6,000) or both, without eligibility for bail prior to trial for slaughtering, consuming, or transporting cattle. In Karnataka, the slaughter of all cattle, except for buffalo older than 13 years, is illegal, with violators subject to imprisonment of between three and seven years and penalties of between 500,000 and 1,000,000 rupees

(\$6,000 to \$12,000). Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir penalize cow slaughter with imprisonment of two to 10 years. Gujarat state law mandates a minimum 10-year sentence and a maximum sentence of life in prison for killing cows, selling beef, or illegally transporting cows or beef.

Madhya Pradesh imposes fines of 25,000 to 50,000 rupees (\$300 to \$600) and prison sentences of six months to three years for “cow vigilantism,” i.e., committing violence in the name of protecting cows. This is the only law of its kind in the country.

The National Commission for Minorities, which by law is to include representatives from the six designated religious minority groups and the National Human Rights Commission, investigates allegations of religious discrimination. Two of the commission’s seats reserved for religious minorities are vacant. The commission works under the Ministry of Minority Affairs which is responsible for the formulation of overall policy and planning, coordination, evaluation, and review of regulations and programs for the benefit of all minority communities, including religious minorities. Eighteen of the country’s 28 states and the National Capital Territory of Delhi have state minorities commissions. These commissions have no enforcement powers but may make recommendations to the government on how to adhere to treaties and other international instruments, conduct investigations based on written complaints of criminal or civil violations (including religious discrimination), submit findings to law enforcement agencies, and make recommendations for restitution for victims.

The constitution establishes the legal basis for preferential public benefit programs for Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe communities, as well as members of the “other backward classes,” a category for groups deemed to

be socially and educationally disadvantaged. The constitution specifies that only Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists are eligible to be deemed members of a Scheduled Caste. As a result, Christians and Muslims qualify for benefits only if deemed to be members of “backward” classes due to their social and economic status.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain a missionary visa.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **Government Practices**

### **Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement**

There were reports of state inaction in investigating and prosecuting crimes against members of religious minority groups. Some human rights organizations said this emboldened those who sought to commit violence against members of religious minorities, and some groups representing religious minorities said they lacked confidence in the government’s ability and willingness to protect them from violence or investigate crimes against members of religious minorities.

On February 19, a crowd of Christians estimated by the media to number more than 20,000 gathered in New Delhi to call the attention of the government to what they said was increasing violence against Christians and Christian institutions. Some speakers at the protest said they had faith in the country’s leadership and legal system to protect them, but other participants expressed doubts about the government’s commitment to address their concerns and said incidents of violence against the Christian

community were indicative of a broader trend of discrimination against minorities in the country.

One of the protest organizers told media that Christians had yet to see action on what he said was the Prime Minister's promise in 2015 to "secure religious freedom for every citizen." The leaders of the protest signed a memorandum to Prime Minister Modi, President Murmu, and other government officials requesting "justice from the government for the indiscriminate violence against Christians, guidance to empower law enforcement authorities to provide better protection [for Christians], and stricter actions against the disruptive vigilante groups who impede religious freedom in the country and operate with impunity." The leaders also asked the government to create a separate commission to address the issue of targeted religion-based violence against members of religious minority groups, especially Christians; quickly close legal cases based on false accusations of forced conversion; rebuild churches which they stated were illegally demolished; and adequately investigate and follow due process regarding accusations of forced conversion and reports of religious-based violence or discrimination.

Following the protests, on April 13, President Murmu met with a Christian delegation led by Catholic Archbishop of New Delhi Anil Couto. In a press statement issued after the meeting, the delegation said it discussed "the many targeted attacks" against Christians in the country. President Murmu did not release an official statement, but one media outlet reported that she promised to take "necessary steps to stop rising anti-Christian violence." On April 25, Prime Minister Modi met with Christian leaders in Kerala; media reported that he pledged during that meeting to ensure the protection of the Christian community nationwide.

In April, the government filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court in response to a 2022 request by Catholic Archbishop of Bangalore Peter Machado and the NGOs National Solidarity Forum and the Evangelical Fellowship of India that the government investigate attacks against Christians. The government affidavit said that the Christian petitions gave an “exaggerated and wrong impression” of the attacks and that a majority of incidents alleged as Christian persecution were either “wrong or wrongfully projected.” The government affidavit stated that 263 of the 495 incidents cited by the petitioners had not been reported to police. In May, Archbishop Machado and the Christian groups filed a counter-affidavit in which they said that attacks against Christians around the country were “not spontaneous or unconnected” but part of a “well-planned” strategy by Hindu groups, and that such attacks coincided with some states enacting religious conversion laws. The Christian petitioners asked the Supreme Court to appoint a monitoring agency led by a retired Supreme Court justice to supervise the criminal investigations underway into some of the anti-Christian incidents in “troubled spots” around the country. In June, the UCF said Christians were facing more First Information Reports (FIRs) from police than their accused attackers due to “the police’s failure to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of such mob violence.” In July, the UCF asked the Supreme Court to appoint a special investigation team comprised of retired national police officers to investigate attacks against Christians. The Supreme Court was considering the case and the related petitions at year’s end.

On April 21, UCF national coordinator A.C. Michael wrote a letter to Prime Minister Modi stating, according to media outlets and other NGOs, that Christians were being harassed and imprisoned on false and fabricated charges of conversion in states that had laws preventing religious conversion. Michael wrote there was “aggression by vigilante mobs comprised of religious extremists, acts of violence against Christian leaders

and members, church arson and vandalism, disruption of prayer services, and forced conversion to Hinduism.” The letter expressed concern about the safety of Christian schools in India from violent mob attacks by Hindu groups.

According to media reports, the Prime Minister’s Office acknowledged receiving the letter and opened a file on the government’s Public Grievances Portal. In addition, Chairman of the NCM Iqbal Singh Lalpura met with Christian groups, including the UCF, in September. According to the UCF, after the meeting, Singh Lalpura said the commission would address cases of persecution of Christians; he proposed that a team from the NCM and Christian groups tour some of the areas where persecution occurred regularly. Some Christian leaders told media there was little to reassure them that the administration of Prime Minister Modi was serious about addressing what they stated was the ongoing persecution of Christians in the country. The UCF spokesman said that the NCM still lacked the required Christian representative, for example. Some outside observers also stated that government actions targeted members of religious minorities, and that the government failed to protect members of religious minorities from attacks.

In March, a group of 93 former senior civil servants wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Modi expressing concerns regarding “continued harassment, through speech and criminal action, of minority groups in the country by persons associated with your government, your party, organizations connected to it, and by mischief makers from amongst the public.” The ex-bureaucrats, who called themselves the Constitutional Conduct Group, called for the Prime Minister’s attention, in particular to the rising incidences of attacks and persecution against the Christian minority, often due to allegations of forcible conversion. The group wrote, “Our

Constitution clearly spells out that all citizens, irrespective of religion, are equal and have equal rights, but we are compelled to protest to you against the increasing incidents of outright discrimination against Christians occurring in recent times.”

In their letter, the group stated, “It is troubling that violence against Christians in different parts of the country has persisted and has increased in recent years.” The group called on Modi “as Prime Minister of our country, and of all of its people, including Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities, and as a leading member of the BJP, to speak out against these outrageous acts, and to ensure that the police and other officials prevent such incidents from recurring. Christians today and all other minorities need to be reassured that they are no less citizens of India than their Hindu brethren.” The group, which included former cabinet secretaries, police officials, and diplomats from various religious groups, wrote a similar letter to Prime Minister Modi in 2022, urging him to take stronger actions to protect Muslims. There was no public response from the Prime Minister to either letter as of the end of the year.

On July 31, Indian railway security official Chetan Singh shot his superior officer and three Muslim men on a train near Mumbai. Singh killed the officer following an argument, then shot the Muslims who were located in other cars of the train. In a video taken after the attack, Singh warned Muslims to vote only for Prime Minister Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, both Hindus and members of the BJP. Police arrested Singh as he exited the train and he was remanded into custody on August 11, charged with homicide and promoting enmity between religions, according to media reports.

During the year, police and some courts acted on past cases involving the death, injury, or detention of members of religious minority groups or violence between religious groups. On March 3, Gujarat police arrested 10 more individuals charged with involvement in April 2022 communal violence in Khambat, Gujarat, which erupted after a Hindu religious procession for the Hindu Ram Navami holiday moved through a predominantly Muslim neighborhood there.

In its latest World Report, HRW said police “failed to properly investigate crimes against minorities while administrative officials responded by summarily punishing victim communities, including those who protested such abuses.”

In April, in response to a petition filed in 2021, a court in Uttar Pradesh acquitted 41 Hindu men charged with killing Muslims during the communal violence in Maliana village in 1987; the court ruled there was lack of evidence for the charges. Local Muslims and surviving family members of the victims said they were very disappointed by the court’s action. According to *BBC News*, former director general of the Uttar Pradesh police Vibhuti Narain Rai and others filed the petition which led to the acquittals because the original investigation was “faulty from the start.” Local Muslims requested a new investigation, another trial, compensation for the victims and a re-examination of the role of the state’s Provincial Armed Constabulary in the violence. In May, one of the victims, Rais Ahmed, challenged the acquittals in the Allahabad High Court. The state government separately challenged the acquittal noting it did not agree with the ruling.

Also in April, a court in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, acquitted, for lack of evidence, 69 Hindus who had been charged with the killing of 11 Muslims during

communal riots in that state in 2002. The attorney for the victims said they would appeal the decision to a higher court. Those acquitted, who were all free on bail, included former Bajrang Dal leader Babu Bajrangi and VHP leader Jaydeep Patel, according to media reports. More than 1,000 persons, mostly Muslims, were killed in the 2002 riots. Of the 18 others sentenced for the killings, 17 have since died and former BJP legislator Maya Kodnani was released because of poor health in 2018.

The Bilaspur High Court in Chhattisgarh granted bail on April 19 to 10 Protestant church leaders who were arrested in January following a series of violent clashes between members of the Scheduled Tribe community and tribals who converted to Christianity in the Narayanpur and Kondagon districts of that state. According to a Christian news source, 33 Christian villages were attacked by the tribe members after the Christians refused to renounce their religion; many Christians were injured. Media reported that police arrested both Scheduled Tribe individuals and tribal Christians; some Christian leaders were charged with rioting, being armed with deadly weapons, voluntarily causing hurt to public servants on duty, and criminal intimidation and assault. If convicted, they could face fines and up to 10 years in prison, according to media reports. One Christian leader said they “had no role in the violence” but were implicated in the case simply because they were “visiting the victims.” Another said the Christian leaders were arrested to appease the Scheduled Tribe community, which comprised a large majority of the population.

On July 5, a court in Jharkhand’s Seraikela-Kharsawan District sentenced 10 men to 10 years each in prison on murder charges for the 2019 lynching of Muslim Tabrez Ansari. Ansari died after being tortured and forced to chant Hindu slogans by a mob that accused him of theft.

On July 13, the Special National Investigation Agency (NIA) court in Kochi, Kerala convicted six Muslim members of the banned Popular Front of India (PFI) in the second trial involving a 2010 attack against Christian Professor, T. J. Joseph in Kerala. The accused were convicted after chopping off Joseph's right hand for allegedly blaspheming the Prophet Muhammad in a question he drafted for a college examination. Three of the six were sentenced to life in prison; the others to three years in prison each.

On August 7, the Supreme Court began the final hearing on several petitions, including one from the victim, a Muslim woman named Bilkis Bano, challenging the 2022 release of 11 Hindu men sentenced to life in prison after being convicted of gang raping the victim during the 2002 Gujarat riots; the men were also convicted of killing 14 members of her family including her three-year-old daughter. The men were released after serving 15 years in prison, leading to criticism from opposition parties, activists, and several journalists, who said the decision discriminated against the country's Muslims and was a "grave miscarriage of justice."

In October, the Gujarat High Court sentenced four policemen to 14-days in prison and fined them 2,000 rupees (\$24) each for publicly flogging four Muslim men in Undhela village in 2022. The court suspended the sentence for 90 days to give the policemen time to appeal the verdict. The police flogged the men as they were arresting them for throwing stones at a Hindu religious festival and injuring seven persons, including a policeman.

An investigation continued at year's end into the April 2022 Hindu-Muslim clashes in Hubballi, Karnataka, regarding a WhatsApp profile status shared by a college student that allegedly showed a saffron flag, a Hindu symbol, flying over Mecca. The police arrested 158 persons; nine were released on bail as of June. A trial was also underway at year's end.

Courts took actions during the year related to 2022 remarks by suspended BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma that were seen as critical of Prophet Muhammad. In July, a court in Mumbai denied bail to Muslim Yusuf Khan, one of the 11 accused of murder in the June 2022 killing of Hindu pharmacist Umesh Kolhe in Amravati, Maharashtra, after Kolhe shared a social media post that supported Sharma's remarks. Media reported that the case of Khan and four of the other accused continued. The five were under arrest, but there was no information available concerning the other six accused.

The trial continued at year's end in the June 2022 killing of Hindu Kanhaiya Lal Teli in Udaipur, Rajasthan, by two Muslim men who recorded the act on their phone. The National Investigation Agency charged 11 persons under various sections of the penal code and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act related to a terror conspiracy. The accused said they killed Teli for his social media posts supporting Sharma's remarks.

There were several court decisions and some court actions related to the 2020 protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the related Hindu-Muslim communal riots in New Delhi. The CAA, which was passed by Parliament in 2019 but had not come into effect by the end of the year, would provide a fast track to citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians who illegally entered the country from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan before 2014. Minorities not explicitly included in the CAA including minority Muslim communities and religious minorities outside of the three countries specified in the CAA would be ineligible for this expedited path to citizenship. On March 10, a Delhi court sentenced nine Muslims to seven years in prison for their role in the Hindu-Muslim communal riots and fined them 20,000 rupees (\$240) each

to be paid as compensation to the victims. On November 21, the Delhi High Court began considering bail pleas by six of those arrested during the riots, including Muslim Khalid Saifi, founder of the NGO United against Hate, who was charged under antiterrorism laws for organizing the protests; he remained in custody as of the end of the year. Media reported that 172 persons, including Hindus and Muslims arrested for their roles in the violence, remained in jail.

The Supreme Court took no action on the bail plea of Muslim student Umar Khalid, who was arrested and imprisoned following the riots, despite saying in September that the court would review his case. A New Delhi sessions court heard arguments concerning the bail applications of other accused protest organizers, but did not render verdicts.

### **Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression**

There were numerous reports of authorities acting in response to complaints of “forced” religious conversions during the year, including arresting Christians and Muslims accused of forcing others to convert and arresting Hindus who attacked those accused of forcing others to convert. Some religious organizations stated that anticonversion laws were used to justify actions restricting the right of individuals to engage in religious activities. Although none of the anticonversion laws in the country mention particular faiths, sources stated that in practice they were enforced only against individuals who converted to Islam or Christianity; there were very few cases involving conversion to Hinduism, voluntary or otherwise. In some cases, Christian groups said police aided mobs who disrupted worship services accused of forcibly converting Hindus or stood by while mobs acted against Christians. NGOs and media reports noted convictions under

anticonversion laws were rare although arrests and legal cases filed under such laws significantly disrupted the lives of those charged.

Media reported that as of May, 855 arrests had been made under Uttar Pradesh's anticonversion law since it was introduced in 2020. Another report from the NGO International Christian Concern (ICC) said 398 Christians had been arrested under the state's anticonversion law since its inception. A local NGO said that the overwhelming number of accused under the Uttar Pradesh law were either Muslim or Christian. There were no figures available reporting the total number of arrests under this law in 2023, but there were no reports of Hindus being arrested under this law. In the Azamgarh District of that state, media reports said that on May 18, the police arrested 18 persons as part of a gang that allegedly carried out illegal conversions to Islam. According to police, the group decorated an area of a slum in Chirkihit village to look like a shrine, then attracted people with "lucrative offers" (unstated) for conversion while praising Islam and criticizing Hinduism. In the same area in July, police arrested 20 Christians on charges of conversion in two cases, according to ICC, after a crowd described as Hindu nationalists ransacked a local tent used by Christians for prayer gatherings. None of the crowd was arrested, according to ICC.

One Christian leader told ICC that at least 57 Christians were in prison in Uttar Pradesh on anticonversion charges as of July. Union of Catholic Asian News (UCA News), citing other media reports, said 91 Christians were in detention in that state under conversion charges as of August. Christian leaders in Uttar Pradesh told UCA News that "hardline" Hindu groups in the state "misuse the state's anticonversion law to file false complaints against Christians." The Irish NGO Church in Chains reported that police arrested 22 pastors for conversion activities in the Azamgarh, Ghazipur, and Jhansi Districts in Uttar Pradesh on July 30, including a pastor and his wife who

were briefly jailed with their one-year-old. Most of those detained were freed on bail within 10 days. A Christian leader in the state told the NGO that “the situation has reached such a stage that holding a prayer service or reading the Bible at home can land you in jail.”

The media outlet AsiaNews reported that in Chhattisgarh on April 30, police briefly arrested 13 Christians who had been holding a prayer service in a private home. The Christians called the police after a crowd of Hindu Bajrang Dal activists gathered outside the home to protest the meeting and shouted Hindu chants. The Christians said that when police arrived one hour later, they charged the organizers of the meeting with disturbing the police and accused them of converting individuals to Christianity, but took no action against the protestors, some of whom were armed. After the incident, Archbishop of Raipur Victor Henry Thakur, chairman of the Council of Catholic Bishops of Chhattisgarh, said that the government was detaining Christians on “baseless” conversion allegations by “right-wing extremists” in such incidents while those who caused the disturbances went free.

On June 24, Odisha police filed a case under that state’s Freedom of Religion Act against India-born Canadian national Mohan Kidangalil Eapen. He and two others were charged with “luring tribal children under the pretext of a prayer meeting” and attempting to convert them to Christianity. The police registered the case after VHP activists stopped Eapen from organizing the meeting and handed him over to police. Indian media reports said Eapen was in the country on a tourist visa which forbids conducting religious activities. These reports quoted VHP leaders who said the meeting was meant for religious conversion, but the local pastors who hosted Eapen said the event was a private birthday gathering. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) on July 4 wrote to the Jagatsingpur District magistrate asking for a report on the incident and legal action

against Eapen. The NCPCR said that Eapen and the others were trying to convert 11 minor children.

During the year, some courts acted on past cases involving allegations of illegal religious conversion. In February, Vijay Masih, a pastor jailed following a Maundy Thursday service in 2022 that Hindus said illegally converted persons to Christianity, was denied release from jail in Uttar Pradesh, despite being approved for bail by the Allahabad High Court in January. The Uttar Pradesh government extended his sentence because of new charges filed by Hindu groups, the media said. Masih, the pastor of an Evangelical Church of India congregation in Fatehpur, was one of 50 Christians who were arrested after a crowd of Hindus disrupted the 2022 service. Media reported he was originally arrested and released in April 2022, then rearrested in October 2022.

In a related case, Christian media reported in March that the Supreme Court ordered that two other men accused of illegal religious conversion in the Maundy Thursday 2022 incident should not be arrested “pending further orders”; the decision overturned a lower court ruling ordering their arrest. The two brothers, Rajendra Bihari Lal (vice chancellor) and Vinod Bihari Lal (director) were officials at the Christian-run Sam Higginbottom University of Agriculture, Technology and Sciences in Uttar Pradesh.

In May, the Bombay High Court revoked a 2022 administrative order banning Christian Pastor Dominic D’Souza and his wife from carrying out religious activities. According to media reports, the Bombay High Court said there was no material on record to justify the order, which violated the couple’s “fundamental rights enshrined in Articles 19, 25 and 26 of the Constitution of India as it seeks to deny them both of their freedom of speech and expression and to their freedom of conscience and the right to

freely profess, practice, propagate their religion or form religious institutions.” The couple had been arrested in 2022 under Goa’s Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisement) Act for allegedly enticing a person to convert to Christianity and for promoting enmity between groups on the grounds of religion. The Bombay High Court granted them bail the day after their arrest. The investigation into their conversion case was ongoing as of December 31.

During the year, the government acted to criminalize marrying or having intercourse by employing deceitful means. In December, both houses of Parliament approved laws which amended colonial-era rules to criminalize making false promises and concealing one’s identity to sexually exploit a woman, media reported. The new laws set penalties of up to 10 years in prison for those crimes and set specific penalties for other crimes against women such as rape of a minor and gang rape. When he introduced the legislation in March, Home Minister Amit Shah said, “Crime against women and many social problems faced by them have been addressed in this bill. For the first time, intercourse with women under the false promise of marriage, employment, promotion and false identity will amount to a crime.” Opponents such as Congress Party Member of Parliament (MP) Abhishek Manu Singhvi said the new laws were unnecessary and out of alignment with the lighter penalties given for what he said were more serious offenses, such as bribery or provoking a riot. Although the new penal code did not mention religion, some critics and proponents of the law said provisions on deceit by “suppressing identity” aimed to criminalize “love jihad,” a derogatory term referring to Muslim men seeking to marry women from other faiths to convert them to Islam.

On March 23, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis informed the state legislative council that the state government would study the laws adopted in other states to criminalize “love jihad” with the goal of introducing new legislation or amending existing law in response to what he said was the public demand as demonstrated in rallies in the state.

Following state elections in May, the new Karnataka cabinet announced it would repeal the state’s 2022 anticonversion law, introduced by the previous BJP government, during the legislative session that began in July. As of December 31, the law had not been repealed. Archbishop Machado, who led the coalition of religious groups and NGOs that challenged the 2022 law, said it was “discriminatory, anticonstitutional and unnecessary.” Before the new state government took office, police registered 21 cases of violating anticonversion laws in Karnataka in 2022-23.

The courts also ruled on state-level anticonversion laws during the year. In January, during a hearing on the Madhya Pradesh law governing religious conversions, Supreme Court Justice M.R. Shah stated that “all religious conversions cannot be presumed to be illegal,” according to media reports. The Supreme Court agreed to hear a Madhya Pradesh government appeal against a 2022 Madhya Pradesh High Court decision that suspended a mandatory provision in that state’s law requiring a person who desired to convert to another faith to give 60 days’ prior notice to the local district magistrate. That provision in the current Madhya Pradesh law imposed sentences of three to five years in prison and a fine up to 50,000 rupees (\$600) for anyone who refused to provide the required preconversion notice.

The Supreme Court also asked in January that petitioners challenging anticonversion laws in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttarakhand, Gujarat and

Madhya Pradesh present a consolidated petition to the court by February. In March, the Supreme Court asked all states facing challenges to their anticonversion laws to respond to petitioners by April. Those states include the five states the Supreme Court mentioned in January, plus Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. The NGO Citizens for Justice and Peace filed the challenges in all eight states against their anticonversion laws. The states had not filed their responses by year's end.

In its annual report, HRW said the government “persisted with policies that discriminated and stigmatized religious and other minorities.” This led to “increasing incidents of communal violence in many parts of the country.” HRW said “police in BJP-governed states failed to properly investigate crimes against minorities while administrative officials responded by summarily punishing victim communities, including those who protested such abuses” and the constitutional authorities designed to protect the rights of children, women, religious minorities, tribal groups, and Dalits, “did not function independently.”

### **Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or in Community with Others**

The Ministry of Home Affairs continued to enforce registration requirements under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which applied to NGOs, including religious organizations, that received foreign contributions. Media outlets reported that 1,111 NGOs were granted FCRA licenses in 2023. In March, the Minister of State for Home Affairs told Parliament that the government cancelled registration certificates of 1,828 nonprofit associations across the country under the provisions of the FCRA between 2018 and 2022. The ministry did not report how many religious organizations were among those granted or denied licenses. In June, media

reported that the government cancelled the FCRA license of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) of Delhi because of unspecified "misuse of foreign grants" in its operation of women's shelters. YWCA Delhi leaders said they were considering an appeal. However, the government did not sanction the national YWCA of India; its FCRA license was extended to 2028. In December, the government also revoked the FCRA license of the Church of North India, a prominent evangelical organization, over unspecified rules violations.

NGOs, including religious organizations, continued to criticize the government's use of FCRA for reducing the amount of foreign contributions that NGOs could use for administrative purposes and adding what they described as onerous oversight and certification requirements. In 2022, Home Minister Shah stated that amendments to FCRA were necessary to halt NGOs using foreign funds to engage in religious conversion and engaging in "anti-national activities." Some organizations working on religious programs or advocacy, including Hindu organizations, reported difficulties in obtaining registration approval for their activities. In response, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) started a helpdesk in July to help NGOs submit their queries and issues regarding the FCRA.

During the year, there were reports of government action affecting the activities of religious groups. On February 28, authorities in the Upper Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh banned prayer healing, healing crusades, and healing by local Hindu priests, according to *UCA News*. The local magistrate said the practices were "misleading" people by influencing them away from modern medical treatment. In a statement, district authorities also said healing prayer meetings led to "social-cultural problems like conversion to other faiths" which "spread discord among people and groups." The

president of the Arunachal Christian Forum said the district's order was "against our fundamental right to practice our religion."

The Madhya Pradesh government provided police protection to the 18 churches in the Jhabua District during Holy Week in April, at the request of the local diocese. A spokesman for one of the churches said the diocese sought to avoid "unnecessary charges of religious conversion" from local Hindu groups during services on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

On July 27, the national government permitted more than 40,000 Shia Muslims to participate in a peaceful procession marking the month of Muharram in Jammu and Kashmir, the first time this procession was legally permitted in more than 30 years. The government described the resumption of the procession as a "peace dividend" and "testimony to normalcy" in the area. Local Shia leaders told media the event was "historic."

In June, authorities in the Damoh District of Madhya Pradesh shut down the Ganga Jamuna Higher Secondary School after Hindu nationalists stated that non-Muslim students there were forced to wear headscarves and therefore risked being converted to Islam. Their complaint was based on a poster that depicted Muslim and non-Muslim female students celebrating examination results at the school, all wearing headscarves. Parents denied the allegations, but authorities arrested the school principal and two teachers, and charged 13 school administrators with violation of the Madhya Pradesh Religion Act. In August, the Madhya Pradesh High Court granted bail to the three arrested and directed that school authorities not compel female students to wear headscarves. The court also granted bail to the school administrators.

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah tweeted in December that his government would rescind a policy instituted by the previous state government that restricted religious garb in government educational institutions, most prominently the hijab. This followed the Karnataka High Court's ruling in 2022 that the government could impose dress requirements on students at a girls' school in Udupi, including banning hijabs; the Karnataka High Court ruled then that wearing a hijab was "not an essential part of religious practice." The Supreme Court later issued a split decision in an appeal on the issue, with two justices agreeing that Karnataka could set a dress code banning the hijab, and one justice ruling against on the grounds that wearing a hijab was a matter of personal choice. A larger bench of the Supreme Court was to hear the case but did not do so by the end of the year.

On July 11, following claims by Hindu group Pandavwada Sangharsh Samiti that the 19th century Jumma Masjid mosque resembled a Hindu temple, the Jalgaon district authorities in Maharashtra barred Muslims from entering the mosque to pray. On July 18, the Bombay High Court ordered the Jalgaon District authority to hand over the mosque keys to the community trust and allow Islamic prayers. The district authorities reopened the mosque following the court order.

On August 24, the Karnataka High Court dismissed a petition by a group of Hindu and Christian residents alleging that residential property in Bengaluru was being used illegally as an Islamic prayer hall. Previously, that court had approved the construction of a madrassah on the adjoining property, as long as local building regulations were met. In rejecting the petition, the Karnataka High Court said the petitioners provided no specific legal basis on which to prohibit using residential property for prayer.

In August, the Allahabad High Court ruled that the national Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) could conduct a survey of the 17th century Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, to determine if it was constructed over a Hindu temple demolished by the order of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The Supreme Court temporarily halted the work to allow for an appeal through the courts. Members of the Hindu community earlier sought permission from the Allahabad High Court to conduct Hindu rituals inside of the mosque, citing their fundamental right to pray in the petition, and noting that they were able to pray in the site until a government ban was put in place in 1992. In December, the ASI submitted its survey report as a sealed document to a district judge in Varanasi.

The Allahabad High Court also ruled in December that a court-monitored team of three surveyors could examine the still-operating 17th century Shahi Eidgah Mosque in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, to determine if there were any Hindu relics or symbols there as proof that the site was originally a Hindu temple. In 2022, according to media reports, Hindu groups unsuccessfully petitioned to keep Muslims from praying in the mosque, out of concern that Hindu relics inside could be removed. On social media, Muslim MP Asaduddin Owaisi, president of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen party, said the Shah Eidgah Mosque/Temple dispute had been settled years before, but “the law doesn’t matter anymore. Robbing Muslims of their dignity is the only goal now.” He also said the Allahabad High Court’s ruling violated the terms of the Places of Worship Act 1991, which he stated prohibit such litigation.

In December 2022, the AIMPLB said it would petition the Supreme Court to challenge the 2020 acquittal by a special Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court of all 32 persons, including senior BJP politicians, charged in the 1992 demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. The Allahabad High Court

rejected a similar petition in November 2022. The board had not filed a petition with the Supreme Court by year's end.

In September, the Shri Ramjanmabhoomi Temple Construction Committee announced that the consecration ceremony for the Ram Temple built on the site of the Babri Mosque as per a Supreme Court ruling in 2019, would take place in January 2024, led by Prime Minister Modi. The committee said the ceremony was a major campaign promise of the BJP government. Civil society groups and members of religious minority communities criticized the construction of the Ram Temple as representative of India's shift away from its secular foundations and toward the establishment of a Hindu nation.

Police in Uttar Pradesh arrested four members of a Hindu nationalist group in April and said the four slaughtered a cow near the city of Agra in order to "frame" Muslims and "spur hostility" towards them. The assistant police commissioner said the Hindus provided a list of Muslim suspects, filed an official complaint, and demanded that police arrest them. After investigating, police said that the Muslims named were innocent and the Hindus actually killed the cow. One of the four arrested was Sanjay Jat, a spokesman for the All India Hindu Mahasabha party; police said he was the main conspirator in the incident.

### **Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment**

On August 7, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced that the state government would introduce a law to end polygamy following the conclusions of a state-appointed expert committee that polygamy was not an essential religious practice in Islam and the state had the authority to enact such legislation. On September 4, Sarma told media that the state formed a committee to draft a law covering polygamy and "love jihad,"

which would be introduced in the state assembly in December. Opposition parties criticized the decision as politically motivated. The All India United Democratic Front, an Assam-based Muslim party, said the government was introducing the law “to target the Muslim community.” Polygamy was abolished among Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Christians, and Parsis by legislation in the 19th and 20th centuries, but the 1937 Muslim Personal Laws (Shariat) Act permits polygamy. According to National Family Health Survey data from 2019-20, polygamy continued to be practiced by Muslims (1.9 percent), Hindus (1.3 percent), and other religious groups (1.6 percent) across the country.

On June 26, the Madras High Court ruled caste should not be the deciding factor in the appointment of *Archakas* (priests) in Hindu temples. Justice N. Anand Venkatesh noted that any person well-versed and qualified to perform *pooja* (worship rituals) as per the requirements of the temple *Agama* (rituals followed in the temple) could be appointed as an Archaka.

In March, the Supreme Court upheld an earlier Madhya Pradesh High Court ruling that state governments had the power to regulate admissions and fees charged by minority-run religious schools. The Supreme Court said minority institutions of higher education “should not claim complete immunity” from government regulation in their admissions and fee structures. The Icon Education Society, a Catholic school in Madhya Pradesh, had argued to the state high court that government oversight and regulation of minority schools violated the rights of religious and ethnic minorities in the country to establish and manage their own educational institutions, without government interference. The society said such a right was “guaranteed” in the constitution. Media reported that the decision would have “far reaching implications” for Christian-run schools in that state.

In April, the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister released a working paper that said there was no evidence of religious discrimination in the provision of public services including electricity, bank accounts, mobile phones, and access to sanitary facilities after analyzing more than 1.2 million households. The paper said, “...we do not find any evidence that the government catered only to one community (Hindu majority) or discriminated across households based on districts where one religious community was dominant.”

In December, online media outlets said that Ashish Gupta, a government revenue officer in Maudaha, Uttar Pradesh, was suspended from his position when the government learned that he had converted to Islam. The state government ordered an investigation into his conversion, according to the *Hindustan Times*. Gupta’s wife said his father and a local Muslim cleric arranged Gupta’s conversion so he could marry another woman. Police filed a case based on her allegations and arrested three persons, including the cleric, *The Indian Express* said.

On June 27, Prime Minister Modi said the country should have a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) as called for in the constitution. He said the country could not run with a system of “separate laws for separate (religious) communities.” Several leaders of the Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and tribal communities, including some state government officials and their governments, opposed the initiative. Proponents of a UCC stated that it could strengthen gender equity in civil matters such as divorce and inheritance, while opponents said such a code was part of a larger project to turn the country into a Hindu-majority “Hindustan” that would end constitutional protections for members of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other legally defined “Backward Classes.” In July, the AIMPLB

wrote to the Law Commission of India expressing its opposition to the UCC proposal, stressing that “majoritarian morality” must not supersede the personal law, religious freedom and minority rights. The government took no action on the UCC during the year.

Several political parties and religious and social organizations in majority tribal areas of the northeastern states publicly opposed the application of a UCC, some even before the Prime Minister’s announcement. On February 14, the Mizoram state legislative assembly unanimously adopted a resolution in opposition, and Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga threatened to leave the ruling National Democratic Alliance with the BJP if the UCC were imposed on his state. The regional Mizo National Front party and religious leaders in Mizoram, including from the Presbyterian Church of India, wrote the Law Commission of India to express their opposition to a UCC. Congress Party member Ronald Sapa Tlau, also from Mizoram, told the media a UCC “would result in the oppression of minorities and minority religious communities and even their assimilation by the majority community” in the country. The Kerala Legislative Assembly passed a resolution opposing a UCC, similar to Mizoram’s in August. In addition, Meghalaya State Chief Minister Conrad Sangma said, “diversity was a strength” in the country and a UCC would go “against the idea of India itself.”

On July 8, several tribal organizations under the banner of the Adivasi Samanwai Samiti (Tribal Coordination Committee) staged a demonstration near the Jharkhand BJP headquarters to protest the proposed UCC. Tribal leader Prem Sahi Munda said the UCC was a threat to tribal existence, stating it would dilute the customary tribal laws and rights granted by the constitution. On July 10, a 12-member delegation from Nagaland, led by Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio, met Home Minister Shah and expressed concern

about the UCC, which it said would violate a 1960 government agreement with the Naga tribes that permitted customary tribal practices on social issues such as marriage and divorce.

Some state governments supported the UCC initiative and worked toward implementing UCC laws at the state level. On June 30, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami announced that his state would implement its own UCC and that draft legislation was ready. Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal told the media the Law Commission had received more than 10 million suggestions about the UCC from around the country by the end of the public comment period on July 28. The next step would be meetings with communities and stakeholders around the country, he said.

During the year, some politicians, government officials, and government organizations made statements that members of religious minority groups viewed as controversial or derogatory. For example, media reported that on March 30, Telangana legislator T. Raja Singh, who was detained for more than two months and suspended from the BJP in 2022 for hate speech, said that only Hindus and Muslims who acknowledged Hindu gods should have voting rights. Singh made the remarks while delivering a speech in front of a mosque during a Hindu Ram Navami festival procession. At another public meeting in Adilabad District of Telangana on June 4, he warned Hindu women not to befriend burqa-clad Muslim women because they might convert them and recruit them for ISIS, as described in the 2023 film *The Kerala Story*, a film that was promoted by several BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Modi. The West Bengal government initially banned showings of *The Kerala Story*, deeming it to contain antiminority hate speech. The Supreme Court ruled against the ban. However, according to media reports, at the insistence of the Supreme Court, the producer of the film agreed to include a disclaimer stating that “the film has no authentic

data to back the figure of 32,000 conversions of Hindu and Christians to Islam” and that the film’s content was a fictional account.

At an RSS event in May, media outlets reported that then Minister for Law and Justice Satya Pal Singh Baghel said, “Tolerant Muslims can be counted on (one’s) fingers. Their numbers are not even in thousands.” He said “Even that is a tactic. It is [a way for Muslims] to stay in public life with a mask.”

In a June press conference, Minister for Minority Affairs and Women and Child Development Smitri Irani accused a U.S.-based religious freedom activist of being connected to George Soros and the latter’s alleged “desire to break the Indian democracy.” Following the press conference, the activist recounted what she stated was the online abuse and harassment she received from Hindu nationalist social media accounts, including one with alleged links to an Indian intelligence official set up for the purpose of “discrediting foreign critics of the Modi government,” according to a *Washington Post* report.

According to media reports, on July 21, the Ministry of Minority Affairs wrote Andhra Pradesh Chief Secretary K.S. Jawahar Reddy asking him to investigate a complaint made to the ministry by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community against a resolution passed by the Andhra Pradesh Wakf Board, the designated authority that deals with Muslim properties and endowments. The resolution declared the Ahmadis as “kafirs” (nonbelievers) and “non-Muslims.” The ministry said the wakf board resolution amounted to a “hate campaign” against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community that could have wider ramifications across the country. The ministry also said the wakf board did not have the jurisdiction or authority to determine the religious identity of any religious community or to “expel a person or community from a religion.” The ministry said that the wakf

board had issued the resolution in violation of an earlier Supreme Court ruling not to do so. According to a July 26 media report, the chief executive officer of the wakf board said that the board had not passed any new resolution against the Ahmadi Muslims and the document in question was written by the board chairman “in his personal capacity.”

On September 2, while addressing a writers’ and artists’ association meeting in Chennai, Tamil Nadu State Minister for Sports Udhayanidhi Stalin said the Hindu concept of *Sanatana Dharma* (meaning the eternal values of Hinduism), should be “eradicated” like diseases such as “dengue, mosquitos, malaria, or coronavirus.” The remarks were followed by reactions from Hindu groups, religious figures, government officials, politicians, and political parties who told media that Stalin’s comments were “hate speech against Hinduism and a call for genocide of Hindus.” Prime Minister Modi said Stalin’s remarks represented an assault on Hindu values and faith. In response, Stalin said he was only calling for an end to the caste system associated with Sanatana Dharma, which he said, “divides people in the name of caste and religion.” He stated the BJP was “twisting his words” and spreading “fake news.” The Supreme Court noted that no individual had the right to promote divisive ideas or abolition of an ideology. On September 22 and 27, the Supreme Court accepted petitions asking for action against Stalin, including that Tamil Nadu police file a formal complaint against him. In November, the Madras High Court reprimanded police in Tamil Nadu for not taking any action against Stalin for his remarks, calling it a “dereliction of duty.” That high court noted that no individual had the right to promote divisive ideas or abolition of an ideology.

In Parliament on September 21, BJP MP Ramesh Bidhuri used what Muslims said were religious slurs and expletives against Muslim MP Danish Ali from the Bahujan Samaj Party; Bidhuri’s comments were recorded on official

parliamentary video. The Speaker warned Bidhuri about his remarks and ordered them expunged from the record. The president of Jamaat Ulama-e-Hind, one of the largest Muslim organizations in the country, told media that Bidhuri's abusive "hate speech" demonstrated that "not only the common Muslim but even Muslim MPs were not safe in the new India." He said the remarks were "a manifestation of extreme hatred for Muslims." In a statement, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind said Bidhuri should be disqualified as an MP and expelled from the BJP.

The *Washington Post* reported that in Karnataka, the BJP party workers used a digital campaign to "spread inflammatory material on an industrial scale," falsely accusing the Muslim community of abuses against the Hindu community, including killings. The *Post* reported "a shadowy parallel campaign creating incendiary posts that painted a dire and false message that Muslims, aided by the secular and liberal Congress Party, had abused and murdered members of the Hindu majority." According to the *Post*, "...BJP staffers and the party's allies revealed how they conceive and craft posts aimed at exploiting the fears of India's Hindu majority, and detailed how they had assembled a sprawling apparatus of 150,000 social media workers to propagate this content across a vast network of WhatsApp groups." In an editorial summarizing a major reporting series, the *Washington Post* said that "social media platforms have become conveyor belts for hate under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and its affiliated groups." The reports say that social media platforms "...were late and lame in stamping out vile content aimed at India's Muslim minority."

The government took action in some instances against public statements that religious groups said they considered derogatory. In March, the News Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA) warned media outlets

*Zee News* and *Times Now*, and fined *News18 India*, citing seven examples of “anti-Muslim content” aired or posted by them. The NBDSA said that a broadcast by *Zee News* “selectively targeted” the Muslim community by reporting projections of Muslim population growth out of context. The agency said *Times Now* “wrongfully reported” that pro-Pakistan slogans were raised during a protest in Pune by the banned Popular Front of India. In the case of *News 18 India*, the NBDSA said it found comments by a news anchor “objectionable” and including (anti-Muslim) “religious undertones.” The NBDSA stated, “The entire premise of the [*News 18*] show revolved around creating a negative image of the Muslim community to instigate the members of the Hindu community to develop hatred for Muslims.” The NBDSA fined *News18 India* 50,000 rupees (\$600).

During a hearing in March related to public hate speech by political figures cited in a petition by journalist-petitioner Shaheen Abdullah, Supreme Court justices called for separating religion from politics and for more action by state governments to regulate public comments by political leaders. Justice K.M. Joseph said, “A major problem arises when politicians mix politics with religion ... We [the court] have said in our recent verdict that mixing politics with religion is dangerous for democracy.” In a subsequent ruling on the case the following month, the Supreme Court ordered all states to register cases against anyone using hate speech in public. Justices Joseph and B.V. Nagarathna said hate speech was a “serious offense capable of affecting the secular fabric of the country.” Media outlets reported that Christian, Muslim, and Hindu leaders welcomed the ruling but said that state governments had not acted on similar rulings by the Supreme Court in the past. In the ruling, the Supreme Court said hesitation by state governments to act against hate speech would invite contempt of court charges against those governments. The Supreme Court also said it would continue to

accept petitions against incidents of hate speech in order to promote the “larger public good.”

Police continued to investigate the deaths of two demonstrators who were killed in protests against televised remarks by BJP spokespersons Nupur Sharma and Naveen Jindal in 2022. Muslims, including from Muslim-majority countries and international organizations, all stated they believed the remarks were derogatory to the Prophet Muhammad. Sharma was charged in 2022 with hurting religious sentiment and suspended from her position by the BJP but remained free in 2023 pending trial.

During the year, some government officials made comments and took actions in support of religious tolerance. For example, on the evening of Easter Sunday, Prime Minister Modi visited the Catholic Sacred Heart Cathedral in New Delhi, his first time there as Prime Minister. Media reported that Christian leaders welcomed the visit and said it was an “opportunity for dialogue with the government” aimed to put an end to the “harassment” of Christians in the country.

During his state visit to the United States in June, Prime Minister Modi said “We have proved democracy can deliver [in India]. When I say deliver, regardless of caste, creed, religion, gender – there is absolutely no space for any discrimination [in my government].”

In an interview with the *Financial Times* in December, Prime Minister Modi said, “Indian society itself has no feeling of discrimination towards any religious minority.” As an example, he said the religious minority Parsi community was economically “thriving” in the country despite facing persecution in other countries. The Prime Minister also hosted a Christmas celebration at his residence with several prominent Christian leaders. Media

reported that the Prime Minister praised the contributions of Christians to Indian society and said that Hinduism and Christianity shared values.

International NGOs and civil society organizations urged additional action by the government. HRW stated the “actions and statements by members and supporters of his [Modi’s] BJP party contradicted” Modi’s statements. HRW said “India’s actions and statements on the world stage will never be convincing if the Indian government doesn’t demonstrate a willingness to allow scrutiny of its own record.” HRW further said “[Modi’s] government should ensure that authorities, including in state governments where his party is in power, investigate and prosecute those responsible for inciting or carrying out violence against minorities.” In addition, over 3,200 individuals from the Christian community released a statement dissociating themselves from Prime Minister Modi’s December meeting with Christians, citing growing anti-minority attacks, including in Manipur, and antiminority hate speech by certain government officials.

### **Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom**

Authorities acted against vandalism of religious sites during the year. In Chaukipura, Madhya Pradesh, for example, police arrested three Hindu men accused of burning a Christian church. The pastor said he found the interior of the church building completely charred, all the furniture burned, and Hindu graffiti on the walls when he opened the building before Sunday services on February 12. Police said those responsible – identified as Avneesh Pandey and two others – were targeting churches and Islamic shrines in the area. Police said the three were “fringe elements” who did not belong to a political party. Media reported the accused were charged under the penal code with “injuring and defiling a place of worship with the intent of insulting religion.”

In February, the Supreme Court dismissed a petition from BJP member Ashwini Upadhyay to appoint a commission to prepare a list of “ancient historical-cultural religious places” named by Muslim leaders during their rule to be renamed using Hindu names. In his petition, Upadhyay said that many of the historical locations found in ancient Hindu religious texts had been renamed for what he said were “foreign looters.” According to international media reports, his petition also stated, “Successive governments have not taken steps to correct the barbaric act of invaders and the injury is continuing.” The two-judge panel said the petition went against the principle of secularism enshrined in the constitution.

## **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement**

There were reports throughout the year of attacks against members of religious communities committed by individuals or groups, including killings, assaults, and intimidation. There were also reports of attacks against non-Hindus and Dalits allegedly engaged in cattle slaughter or transporting cattle for slaughter, known as “cow vigilantism.” There were reports of harassment and arrest of Muslim men accused of “love jihad.” There were also multiple cases of communal violence between religious groups.

On February 16, Haryana police found the bodies of two men in a burned-out car in Bhiwani District, whom they subsequently identified as two Muslims, Mohammad Junaid and Mohammad Nasir. According to media reports and the men’s relatives, Junaid and Nasir were accused of cow smuggling while visiting a relative in Haryana and their car was stopped by

members of a so-called cow vigilante group. Members of the group allegedly beat the two men and attempted to take them to two different police stations to be charged but were turned away at both. According to the police report, which was quoted by media, members of the vigilante group then drove the men nearly 100 miles away and set fire to their car while the two were inside. As of August, 10 persons had been arrested for involvement in the killing. Police listed Haryana District coordinator and Hindu Bajrang Dal activist Monu Manesar as one of the 21 accused. Rajasthan police also launched an investigation into the killing of Junaid and Nasir since the two men were from that state. On September 13, Haryana police arrested Manesar and transferred custody of him to Rajasthan police.

On May 13, a Hindu crowd in Akola, Maharashtra, allegedly killed Dalit Vilas Gaikwad and injured eight others, including two policemen, during Hindu-Muslim clashes. Media reported that the crowd mistook the victim as Muslim. The violence began after Muslims alleged a local Hindu nationalist leader insulted them and the Prophet Muhammad on social media. Police arrested 147 individuals and briefly shut down local internet services in response.

In the Nashik District of Maharashtra, a group described by media as cow vigilantes killed Lukman Ansari and attacked two other Muslim youths for allegedly transporting cattle for slaughter on June 8. Police arrested six of the 10 Muslims accused in the incident. In a second incident in the same area, media reports said cow vigilantes lynched Muslim Afan Ansari and injured another Muslim youth on suspicion of carrying beef in their car. Maharashtra police arrested 11 persons accused in that case and charged Ansari and the other Muslim with illegally transporting beef for slaughter. Since Ansari was killed, standard practice would be to drop his name from the transporting beef case once it reached the prosecution stage.

On June 28, Muslim truck driver Muhammad Zahiruddin was lynched in Bihar's Saran District by a crowd that suspected he was carrying beef. According to a media report, Zahiruddin was transporting cattle bones to a factory at Marhaura that used them to make gelatine for medicine capsules.

On July 3, local media reported a crowd beat a Muslim and paraded him half-naked in the Siddipet District of Telangana for allegedly urinating at the statue of Shivaji, a 17th century Hindu king of western India. The man was described as inebriated at the time. After parading him around, local Hindu organizations called for the closure of all commercial establishments to protest the man's action. During the resulting local protests, a crowd also attacked a mosque, according to media reports. Police filed nine cases and arrested 11 individuals.

On July 29, the Supreme Court asked the MHA and police chiefs of six states what action they had taken in six separate incidents of mob lynching of Muslims in 2023. The Supreme Court also ordered that FIRs be opened automatically in such cases for promoting enmity between groups in situations of communal violence. The Supreme Court was responding to a petition filed by National Federation of Indian Women that questioned police inaction in cases of mob violence against Muslims and demanded compensation for the victims. In its ruling, the Supreme Court also referenced its 2018 judgment asking the MHA and all Indian states to take action in cases of mob vigilantism.

There were incidents of violence reported between members of different religious groups. The National Crimes Record Bureau reported 272 instances of communal violence in 2022 (most recent data) compared with 378 in 2021.

During the year, public celebrations of Hindu festivals sometimes resulted in communal violence, particularly when these celebrations included processions through Muslim-majority areas. For example, between March 30 and April 1, there were sporadic incidents of Hindu-Muslim violence in West Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand States during Hindu *Ram Navami* festivals. Media outlets reported that as processions of the BJP and affiliated Hindu nationalist groups, including RSS and the VHP, passed through Muslim-majority neighborhoods, some residents threw stones and yelled at them. The confrontations escalated to violence, arson, and property damage, according to media. In West Bengal, where the RSS and its affiliates organized 2,000 processions for *Ram Navami*, one person was reported killed in Dalkhola. Widely circulated videos on social media depicted participants in the *Ram Navami* processions carrying swords and guns. In Bihar, one person was reported killed and the 110-year-old Azizia Madrassah, the madrassah library, a mosque, and several houses and shops were reported damaged or destroyed. Police arrested several hundred persons in connection with communal violence across those states, according to media reports.

In a statement released on April 4, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) said it had “deep concern” about the violence and vandalism targeting the Muslim community in several states during the Ram Navami processions, which it said reflected “systemic targeting of the Muslim community in India.” The OIC said authorities should take “firm actions against the instigators and perpetrators of such acts” and “ensure the safety, security, rights, and dignity of the Muslim community in the country.”

On July 31 in Nuh, Haryana, communal violence broke out as a Hindu procession led by the VHP made its way through the Muslim-majority district. Six persons, including two constables of the Haryana Home Guard, were killed in the violence and more than 70 others injured. Violence spread the following day to the nearby city of Gurugram where a Hindu mob killed a Muslim cleric and burned down a mosque. Media reported that 188 persons were arrested in connection with the violence. On August 28, the Haryana government denied permission for the VHP to lead another procession through Nuh and deployed security forces to maintain public order. On September 12, Haryana police detained Bajrang Dal leader Monu Manesar, known for posting videos online of engaging in cow vigilante violence against Muslims, for releasing a provocative video just before the Nuh violence, appealing to his followers to join the procession. Haryana police also arrested Congress Party legislator Mamman Khan on allegations that he helped instigate the violence in Nuh.

On August 3-5, the Haryana government demolished 1,208 structures across several towns and villages in the area where the communal violence had taken place. An officer on the Haryana Chief Minister's staff said the structures razed belonged to those arrested in the violence, were houses from which rioters threw firebombs and rocks at other protestors and the police, or were illegal encroachments on government-owned land. Media reports said almost all the properties demolished belonged to Muslims, including in the Rohingya refugee camp in Tauru, and the overall demolition campaign was one of the largest-ever in the region. Local political activists said that demolitions deliberately targeted Muslims and left more than 500 homeless. Media reported that some of those with demolished homes said they had legal documents for their properties and had nothing to do with the violence; they also said they were given little or no advance notice of the demolitions. On August 7, the Punjab and Haryana High Court ordered a

stay on further demolitions, asking in its order “whether the buildings belonging to a particular community are being brought down under the guise of law and order problem and an exercise of ethnic cleansing is being conducted by the State.” The government respected his order and halted demolitions. The Supreme Court further described calls for an economic boycott against the Muslim community as “unacceptable” and urged local authorities to take action against those promoting hate speech.

In March, the NGO Citizens and Lawyers Initiative released its *Routes of Wrath* report covering Hindu-Muslim communal violence during the Hindu Ram Navami and *Hanuman Jayanti* festivals in April 2022. The report stated that “despite the well-known lessons from earlier riots,” religious processions “were permitted to pass through the most congested and sensitive areas,” leading to communal violence in nine states “followed by targeted attacks on Muslim-owned properties, businesses and places of worship.” The report said that Hindu nationalist organizations had taken over the processions during those festivals over the years. It also stated that Muslim families were displaced in areas where rioting and violence occurred, either by demolition of their property or because they feared for their safety. The report said, “no cause of interfaith riots has been as recurrent and widespread as the religious procession.” In the report’s prologue, former Supreme Court Justice Rohinton F. Nariman said one solution to the violence would be to “sensitize” police that “Muslims situated in India are citizens of India.”

A study of media reports on communal riots and incidences of mob lynching conducted by the NGO Center for the Study of Society and Secularism cited 32 instances of communal riots reported by five major national newspapers in 2023, down from 41 in 2022. The study reported 21 cases of mob lynching in 2023, up from 15 in 2022. The 32 instances of communal riots

resulted in the killing of 15 persons, including five Muslims, four Hindus, and three police personnel. In the 21 instances of mob lynching, 16 Muslims were killed, according to the study. The study said 11 communal riots took place in Maharashtra and five in Gujarat. The study also said 22 of the 32 communal riots took place in states where the BJP led the government. The study stated, “Communal violence in India in 2023 saw religious festivals being weaponized to provoke communal riots and subsequently enabling the state to use it as a pretext to demolish properties belonging mostly to the members of Muslim community. Out of 32 communal riots, 9 communal riots were triggered off during the Ram Navami processions that were organized by Hindu nationalists.”

In the state of Manipur, violence broke out between the majority Meitei ethnic group and the minority Kuki ethnic group in May. Meitei are predominately Hindu while Kuki are predominately Christian. Media reports said the violence began in Imphal after large crowds of Kukis protested a decision by the Manipur High Court directing the Manipur state government to consider the Meitei community’s request to grant it special status as a Scheduled Tribe and send a recommendation to the national government to do the same. According to Indian and international outlets, Kukis – the minority group in the area and already included as a Scheduled Tribe under the constitution – feared this change in status could open their legally protected traditional lands to exploitation by the majority Meitei, and eventually lead to their displacement. Many media outlets described the ethnic violence as driven by political and economic concerns. Religion and ethnicity are closely linked, however, and some places of worship were reportedly targeted for their religious affiliation.

In June, the Indigenous Tribal Leaders’ Forum said that at least 253 churches were burned down during the violence in Manipur. According to

international and domestic media reports, the violence resulted in the killing of more than 200 persons and the displacement of over 60,000. Although the violence resulted in the destruction of religious places belonging to both communities, media reports stated that more churches than Hindu temples were destroyed. In addition, a group of Meitei reportedly attacked the small Bnei Menashe Jewish community, who are ethnically Kuki, killing one community member, destroying two of their synagogues, and displacing more than 1,000 members of the community. Most of the attacks against religious sites were reported to have taken place in the first few days of the conflict, when the interethnic violence was at its peak. Some members of the Kuki community reported that police abetted the Meitei groups who engaged in violence. There were also reports of Meitei Hindus pressuring Meitei Christians to convert and attacking churches belonging to Meitei Christians. One local Meiti Christian leader was reported to have said that the Meiti Christians had been “attacked from both sides.” Levels of violence decreased after a delayed surge of security forces in Manipur in the months after the conflict. The Irish NGO Church in Chains reported that violence continued after the initial rioting, including on June 9 when two Meiteis killed Domkhohoi Haokip, a Christian Kuki, as she was praying in a church in Khoken.

The Supreme Court criticized the failure of the central government and the Manipur state government to halt the violence, especially in the early stages of the conflict. In August, the Supreme Court ordered a judicial panel to oversee humanitarian relief and compensation for those impacted by the violence in Manipur. In December, the Supreme Court ordered the Manipur state government to take steps to protect places of worship and restore places of worship for “all religious faiths and denominations” destroyed during the violence.

In December, the UCF reported 731 attacks against Christians across the country during the year, compared with 599 such incidents in 2022. The UCF stated the attacks included “incidents (of) mob violence led by so-called vigilante groups of (a) particular faith who are allegedly receiving support from people in power.” UCF state-by-state data showed that most incidents were in Uttar Pradesh (301) and Chhattisgarh (152). Other states which reported higher instances of attacks against Christians included Haryana (52), Jharkhand (49), Madhya Pradesh (38), Karnataka (27), and Punjab (21). In April, during a hearing on the 2022 petition by Archbishop Peter Machado and two Christian NGOs for greater protection of Christians and more diligent government investigation of violence against Christians, the government told the Supreme Court that the UCF “exaggerated” claims of attacks against Christians, to create a “false narrative.” In July, the UCF’s national coordinator stated that “government data (on violence against Christians) downplays the severity of the situation.”

In January, the U.S.-based Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America (FIACONA) released its 2023 annual report, which documented 1,198 reported incidents of violence against Christians in 2022 throughout the country, compared with 761 in 2021. Incidents included neighborhood skirmishes, targeted killings, and armed assaults. The report stated that the violence against Christians was “planned and orchestrated” by “Hindu nationalist political parties as part of a larger design to create a Hindus-only state.” FIACONA said the estimated cost to property and businesses from these attacks was approximately \$100 million.

In its World Watch List report covering 2023, the Christian NGO Open Doors stated that Christians in the country were “increasingly under threat...by an ongoing belief among some Hindu extremists that Indians ought to be Hindu – and any faith outside of Hinduism is not welcome in India.” The NGO said,

“This mindset has led to violent attacks across the country and impunity for the people who perpetrate this violence, especially in places where the authorities are also Hindu hardliners.” The NGO also said, with more states implementing anticonversion laws, there is “an environment where any Christian who shares their faith can be accused of a crime, intimidated, harassed and even met with violence.” Open Doors stated that 160 Christians were killed for “faith-related reasons” in the country from October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2023 and 2228 Christian properties including churches attacked. Open Doors also said 2085 Christians were detained during this period for “faith-related reasons.” Other sources could not verify these statistics, however.

In January, 300 Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish and Baha’i leaders gathered with Christians at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in New Delhi to show solidarity with Christians who were forced to leave their homes by violence in Chhattisgarh in December 2022. Vatican News reported that the participants lit candles, prayed together, and asked the government to stop violence against Christians, which it said were targeted because they refused to renounce their faith.

There were numerous reports during the year of Hindu groups and organizations taking action against Christians they said were trying to convert others to Christianity and against others they said made derogatory remarks against Hinduism or Hindu deities. In some incidents, Hindus attacked Christians and disrupted Christian worship services.

On January 1, for example, a Hindu crowd assembled in Gorra, Chhattisgarh, and summoned the town’s Christians to join them. When a few Christians arrived, *Christianity Today* stated they were beaten with sticks, bricks, and stones by the crowd, with some victims requiring hospitalization. One

resident said the crowd accused Christians of “following a foreign religion” and gave them the choice of recanting their faith or leaving the area permanently. *Christianity Today* reported that the incident was part of “weeks of coordinated attacks against Christians” in Chhattisgarh that began in late 2022 and left approximately 1,500 persons homeless. The chairman of the Chhattisgarh Christian Forum (CCF) said in a press conference on January 4 that the CCF had reported the attacks to police but that “no action was taken by them, resulting in the series of attacks against the Christian community. The CCF chairman said, “The police have not only neglected our complaints, but they have also encouraged the attackers and we have evidence of this.”

On February 27, members of the Hindu nationalist organization Bajrang Dal assaulted atheist activist Bairi Naresh in Warangal District, Telangana, for remarks he made during a conference in December 2022 that were deemed derogatory to Hindu deities. Police arrested Naresh on December 31, 2022 and charged him with inciting a riot and insulting religion, and he was released on bail in early 2023. Media outlets reported that police responded to a call from Naresh and attempted to protect him from the crowd. In August, the Telangana Bharatiya Nastika Samajam (Atheist Society of India) expelled him because of his comments in 2022.

Media reported that on April 30 a group of approximately 100 Bajrang Dal members attacked a Christian congregation holding Sunday prayers at a private residence in Chhattisgarh's Durg district; the attackers said the congregation was engaged in forced religious conversion. The host of the prayer meeting said that police stood by and watched without intervening. The Chhattisgarh Christian Forum said that the police detained the host and other Christian community members on charges of “disturbing the peace,” but none of the assailants were arrested.

On July 4, members of the Bajrang Dal, the VHP, and regional political party Maharashtra Navnirman Sena entered the D.Y. Patil High School in Maharashtra's Pune District and assaulted principal Alexander Cotes, alleging that students there were forced to recite Christian prayers and not allowed time off for Hindu festival holidays. Some of the students' parents also took part in the assault, according to media reports. One parent said that the students were "intimidated" by school authorities. No charges were filed after the incident, according to media reports.

On August 4, a group including VHP members assaulted student Ilyas Sarkar Suman in the Koroimura Higher Secondary School in Tripura after he objected to hijab-clad Muslim girls being prevented from attending classes and reportedly ransacked the principal's office in protest with other students. Media aired video showing Suman being dragged out of his classroom by the group and beaten; no school staff intervened to help him.

On August 6, Bajrang Dal members disrupted a church service in Bihar's Nawda District, attacking Protestant Pastor Shyju Joseph and accusing him of converting people to Christianity, *UCA News* reported. One witness said Joseph was beaten badly enough to be taken to a hospital for his injuries.

As of December, fundamentalist Islamic terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiyyba and its proxy group the Resistance Front had killed 12 civilians and migrant laborers as well as 33 members of the security forces in 72 incidents in Jammu and Kashmir, according to the *South Asian Terrorism Portal*. This compared with 30 civilians and 30 members of the security forces killed in 151 incidents in 2022. On January 1 and 2, terrorists killed seven Hindu civilians in the Rajouri District of Jammu and Kashmir in two separate

incidents. In October, terrorists killed Hindu migrant worker Mukesh Kumar from Uttar Pradesh in Pulwama District.

## **Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression**

Incidents of abuses reported against Christians included socially ostracizing and economically boycotting them and prohibiting some from using communal burial grounds because of their religious beliefs, according to the UCF. In September, Meenakshi Ganguly, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Asia Division, said in an interview, "While Hindus have the right to practice their faith, that should not include undermining and attacking fellow Indians who might follow another religion or belief. Instead, some Hindu groups that believe they enjoy the protection and patronage of the ruling BJP, have targeted Muslims and Christians, their places of worship, and even their livelihood."

In a report to a committee of the Irish Parliament on July 4, representatives of the NGO Church in Chains stated, "India's constitution guarantees religious freedom and Christians enjoy freedom in much of the country, but in rural areas they face increasing persecution from Hindu extremists motivated by Hindu nationalist ideology." The NGO representatives said, "The extremists attack small churches, beat pastors and members, set fire to homes and church buildings, and accuse Christians of being involved in forced conversions of Hindus."

There were also reports of Hindus disrupting Muslim events, stating that they included illegal conversions. In June, for example, college authorities in Malegon, Maharashtra, suspended principal Subhash Nikam following objections by a Hindu nationalist group that Nikam opened a career guidance seminar with an Islamic prayer. Media reported that the Hindu

group whose members had disrupted the seminar said that Nikam was illegally converting students to Islam. Nikam said that the local organization sponsoring the seminar, which was not affiliated with the school, usually opened its events with brief Islamic prayers. Police filed a complaint against Nikam.

During the year, there were reports alleging that Muslim men had deceived Hindu women into marrying them and then pressured the women to convert, a practice called “love jihad.” In Maharashtra, Samajwadi Party legislator Rais Shaikh said in December that the Interfaith Marriage Family Coordination Committee established by that state government in December 2022 received 402 complaints of “love jihad” since its creation. In March, State Minister for Women and Child Welfare, Mangalprabhat Lodha, said there were more than 100,000 cases of “love jihad” in Maharashtra when it set up the committee.

In June, BJP president in Bihar State Samrat Choudhary said the BJP would investigate all alleged cases of “love jihad” if voted to power in Bihar in the next (2025) state election.

### **Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or in Community with Others**

In June, media reported that two men in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, posted images of 18th century Mysore ruler Tipu Sultan and an audio message deemed offensive to Hindus on their social media accounts. In addition, a man posted an image of 17th and 18th century Mughal emperor Aurangzeb on his WhatsApp account. Both historical leaders are considered by historians to have oppressed Hindus during their reigns. The social media posts led to large protests by Hindus in Kolhapur on June 7 that were

dispersed by police. Police said all three men who posted the images were charged with “promoting enmity” and “intention to hurt the religious sentiments of others” under the penal code. Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis told media that the social media posts “could not be mere coincidence” and were “desperate attempts” to destabilize law and order in the state.

On August 20, in Tamil Nadu’s Tiruvannamalai District, a Muslim woman was denied permission to take a Hindi language examination conducted by the Dakshina Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha after she refused to remove her hijab. Following the incident, Muslim organizations staged a protest in front of the examination center.

There were instances of Hindus preventing Christians from proselytizing during the year. On March 1, at the World Book Fair in New Delhi, a group of 30 men entered the stall of the Gideons International organization, pulling books off shelves and repeating Hindu religious chants. Police eventually removed the protestors, and video of the incident circulated widely on social media. One eyewitness told journalists that the group did not attack other locations displaying Islamic texts. He added that Gideons International erected its display following the normal rules of the book fair and had been displaying books at the fair for the past 10 years.

There were instances of religious group members making derogatory comments in public about other religious groups during the year. For example, on January 15, news portal *Nijam Today* reported that Hyderabad police arrested Pastor Kuntum Edward William from Andhra Pradesh for his remarks during a church service on January 1 in which he said that the BJP-led central government would carry out a Christian “genocide” in 2023, based on an “American top secret agency report available to him.” *Nijam*

*Today* also reported that William said it was “the duty” of PM Modi and Home Minister Shah “to hate Christians.” The portal shared a social media post by a Hindu nationalist organization with a video of William’s remarks. The pastor, who is also the host of a Christian television program, was charged with making religious hate speech and public provocation. He was later released on bail, the portal reported.

In March, a widely circulated video on social media showed speakers at a VHP event in Kadi, Gujarat, defaming the Pope and calling for those present at the event to “remove Christians” from the area. Christian nuns and Gujarat Roman Catholic authorities on March 21 petitioned the Gujarat Chief Minister for protection and demanded that the speakers be charged under the relevant portions of the penal code. In April, a nun from Vadodara filed a petition in the Gujarat High Court seeking action regarding derogatory remarks against the Pope. The petitioner said police took no action against the VHP speakers, despite the request from Catholic authorities that they do so. The Gujarat High Court had not ruled on the petition as of year’s end.

Media outlets reported that Sakal Hindu Samaj (All Hindu Society), a coalition of Hindu nationalist groups, held 50 public rallies in Maharashtra between November 2022 to March 2023 in which they said Muslims were forcibly converting Hindu women through marriage and called for Hindus to arm themselves and economically boycott Muslims. In February, the Supreme Court ordered Maharashtra police to do more to curb hate speech in the state. In May, Maharashtra police informed the Supreme Court that 30 hate speech-related complaints were registered from February to May. The *Indian Express* online news service said Muslims viewed the rallies as discriminatory because they featured speakers criticizing “love jihad” and “Islamic aggression” in addition to calling for a boycott. A *Washington Post*

reporter who attended one of the rallies in February said she saw persons of all ages expressing Hindu *akrosh* (angst) and calling for “termites” and “bearded traitors” – derogatory terms for Muslims – to leave the country. Citing the NGO Hindutva Watch, the *Los Angeles Times* in October reported that in the first six months of the year, “nearly 80 percent of hate speech events were held in states or territories controlled by the BJP party.”

### **Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment**

There were incidents during the year that members of some minority religious groups viewed as discriminatory or threatening. There were also protests by members of some minority religious groups against treatment or comments they viewed as discriminatory. On February 20, the Gujarat Education Board of Catholic Institutions sought police protection for buildings in the state, and especially for St. Mary's High Secondary School in Amreli District, after members of the VHP and Bajrang Dal entered the school and demanded that photos of Hindu deities be installed inside classrooms and at the principal's office. In a letter to Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, Father Teles Fernandes, secretary of the board, said the incident was “totally unacceptable in a democratic and secular country like India. We as a minority group, feel threatened and intimidated by such elements.”

Also in February, the RSS-affiliated Janajati Dharma Sanskriti Suraksha Manch, a social organization in Assam, demanded removal of the Scheduled Tribe status of anyone who embraced Christianity. A spokesman said to the media, “Tribal people, who have been converted to ‘foreign religions’ such as Christianity and Islam, are getting double benefits, both as members of Scheduled Tribes and as a minority.” On March 26, the organization held a rally in Guwahati to press their demand. In a statement, legislators from the

neighbouring state of Meghalaya “strongly condemned” the Hindu group’s demand which they said went “against the spirit of respecting the indigenous ethnic origin of the Scheduled Tribes of the North East, especially the Christian community in Meghalaya and Nagaland.”

According to a media report, on March 15, a village council in Chhattisgarh's Bastar Region passed a resolution prohibiting tribal members from working on farmland owned by Christians or Hindus, banning Christian cremations within the village, and outlawing the celebration of nontraditional tribal festivals. The resolution said that the spread of Christianity, Hinduism, and other nontribal religions in the area was putting local tribal culture “on the verge of ending.” Bastar District authorities said the village council resolution was illegal, promised action against anyone who discriminated against anyone based on religion, and announced an investigation into the resolution.

On March 25, members of the Scheduled Tribe communities demonstrated in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, to call for a constitutional amendment which would deny rights such as government employment and education quotas to any member of the Scheduled Tribes who converted from their traditional religions to other religions, such as Christianity or Islam. Representatives of 62 tribal organizations took part and were joined by Union Minister of State Bishweswar Tudu, who said the demand for such an amendment was “growing louder across the country.” Tudu said the Scheduled Tribes members had their own culture, which conversion to other faiths would destroy. One tribal leader at the demonstration said many tribal individuals who had converted to other religions (i.e., Christianity) took advantage of the same benefits offered to Scheduled Tribes members who did not convert. “This should be stopped,” he told the media.

Another leader said that tribal people were targeted for proselytization by Christians.

In April, *UCA News* reported that Christians and Muslims in the Bastar area of Chhattisgarh petitioned the local government to act against local leaders of Hindu-led organizations, including the BJP, the VHP, and Bajrang Dal, that had called for an embargo against Christian and Muslim businesses during a rally on April 10 in Jagdalpur. A Christian leader said authorities had agreed to investigate. Following the petitions, BJP officials stated that their party “does not support social discrimination” and is committed “to work for the development of society as a whole.”

In May, the Muslim Youth League in Kerala state offered a 10-million-rupee (\$120,200) “cash reward” for anyone who could provide evidence supporting what they said were false claims in *The Kerala Story* film that ISIS recruited “thousands” of Christian and Hindu women from the state, many through marriage and conversion. A Muslim Youth Group leader said that the film reinforced “Islamophobic tropes” in order to “tarnish the reputation of our state as well as the Muslim community.” Both the Kerala state government and members of the opposition threatened legal action against the filmmakers for “attempting to spread propaganda”; other groups petitioned the Kerala High Court and the national Supreme Court to prevent the film’s release.

On June 7, the Tamil Nadu government closed the Sri Dharmaraja Draupadi Amman Hindu Temple near Melpathi in Villupuram District following a dispute between Vanniyars, members of a higher caste group, and Dalits concerning which group could use the facility. Media reports said that three Dalits were assaulted in April while trying to enter the temple to pray. In response, Dalit groups staged public protests and blocked roads. When the

state's minister for higher education said that everyone had a right to worship at the temple and district authorities would resolve the issue, Vanniyars protested and blocked entry. Local authorities said the temple would be reopened once an "amicable settlement" could be reached between the Vanniyars and the Dalits. The temple was managed by the state Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department.

In August, international media outlets reported about a video circulating on social media showing a teacher in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, ordering her students to take turns slapping a crying seven-year-old Muslim boy standing in front of the class for "not remembering his times tables." As the students slapped the Muslim student, the teacher could be heard saying derogatory remarks in reference to the boy's religion. Police registered a case against the teacher and launched an investigation, with the student moving to another school.

In October, speakers at a conference in Jalgaon, Maharashtra, organized by HJS said Hindus were "waking up and raising their voice(s) against the injustice they face" because Hindus were being "targeted" with charges of hate speech around the country. The HJS organizer for Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh, Sunil Ghanwat, said that although "there has been no incident where [the] speech of Hindutva activists caused law and order problems," Hindus were still charged for their comments under "pressure on the police and administration." To counter what he said were "anti-Hindu" forces, Ghanwat said that the HJS should create organizations to lobby for Hindu issues at every level of government.

Following the October 7 Hamas attack in Israel, the *Guardian* said there was "a flood of disinformation" on social media stating that India faced a similar threat from its Muslim population, particularly in Muslim-majority areas

such as Jammu and Kashmir. According to the *Guardian*, a typical, widely circulated message said, “In the future, India could also face conspiracies and attacks like Israel.” A BJP politician in Karnataka stated on social media, “We may face the situation that Israel is confronting today if we don’t stand up against Politically motivated Radicalism.” Vishnu Gupta, national president of Hindu nationalist organization Hindu Sena, told the *Guardian* that he and 200 others were volunteering for the Israeli army because both countries “are victims of Islamic terror.” Gupta added, “Just as Jerusalem was taken over by Muslims, holy places in India were also invaded by Muslims.”

In its *Freedom in the World* report covering civil liberties including freedom of religion in 2023, the NGO Freedom House rated the country as “partly free” due to “discriminatory policies and a rise in persecution affecting the Muslim population.”

### **Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom**

Several Hindu nationalist publications and social media users attempted to blame interfaith tensions for a June 2 train accident that killed 275 persons and injured over 1,000. The RSS-affiliated publication *Organizer* stated the accident may have resulted from Muslim international terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS attacking transportation infrastructure. Other social media posts also suggested that the accident was carried out by Muslims, since it took place on a Friday (the Islamic Sabbath) and the local railroad station manager was Muslim (an untrue claim, according to media). In a June 4 statement, Odisha police warned the public not to circulate rumors and said there would be “severe legal action” against anyone who did.

There were reports of cooperation between faith groups during the year. In one example, in April, Hindu and Muslim leaders in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, joined with public health authorities to urge residents to have children vaccinated to counter a measles outbreak. Hindu leaders used temple gatherings and Muslim imams used Friday sermons in mosques to spread the message, according to media reports.

## **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

In a joint statement issued during Prime Minister Modi's state visit to Washington in June, the U.S. and Indian governments reaffirmed "their shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights, inclusion, pluralism, and equal opportunities for all citizens." The statement said that both countries recognized "the diversity represented in their nations and celebrating the contributions of all their citizens."

In a joint statement issued during President Biden's visit to New Delhi in September, the U.S. and Indian governments said, "The leaders re-emphasized that the shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights, inclusion, pluralism, and equal opportunities for all citizens are critical to the success our countries enjoy and that these values strengthen our relationship." The Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense's joint statement with Indian counterparts following a meeting in November echoed similar views.

During his visit to New Delhi in April, the Secretary of State met with women leaders and discussed, among other issues, recent developments in religious freedom in the country. In July, the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights met with civil society groups to discuss the treatment of members of marginalized religious and ethnic groups in the

country, among other issues, underscoring the U.S. commitment to its partnership with India and advancing freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador engaged with members of religious communities, including representatives of the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh faiths, to discuss the importance of religious freedom and pluralism; the value of interfaith dialogue, and the operating environment for faith-based organizations. In May, the Ambassador visited historic mosques in Hyderabad and Ahmedabad and engaged with religious minorities and an interfaith youth group. Visiting Mumbai in May, the Ambassador joined religious leaders on an interfaith walk that included visits to Hindu and Parsi temples, a mosque, a synagogue, and a Jesuit university museum. In March, the Chargé d’Affaires hosted an iftar for senior-level Muslim representatives where they discussed religious freedom and pluralism in the country.

Embassy and consulate officials and other visiting senior U.S. officials including the Assistant Secretary of State and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, met with leaders from the government, religious minority communities, NGOs, civil society, and academia to engage on religious freedom concerns and learn about the perspectives and experiences of religious leaders.

In April, the Consul General in Mumbai hosted an iftar with prominent civil society members to discuss religion in the workplace. In Ahmedabad, the Consul-General joined the Ambassador to meet with an interfaith youth group and tour prominent multifaith religious sites in the city to emphasize the importance of religious freedom to all faiths.

Staff from the consulate general in Kolkata regularly engaged with religious leaders across the east and northeast areas of the country to underscore the U.S. government's commitment to human rights and religious freedom. During the year, the Consul General visited the Ahmadi and Dawoodi Bohra communities, minority Muslim communities, to encourage interfaith dialogue.

On April 11, the Consul General in Chennai hosted an iftar for interfaith leaders. In June, she addressed an Indian Philosophy Conference event and stressed U.S. interest in promoting religious freedom, human rights, and tolerance.

On January 10, the Consul General in Hyderabad and the visiting Chargé d'Affaires hosted Muslim youth leaders who were former participants in U.S. government exchange programs to discuss religious freedom and problems faced by the Muslim community.

Embassy and consulate public messaging, including from the Ambassador and the Consuls General, regularly emphasized U.S.-government-supported activities that involved individuals from different religious traditions and marked important religious holidays from various religions in the country.