

Script: The contents of Freedom of Religion or Belief - protection from coercion

An important dimension of Freedom of Religion or Belief is the right to protection from coercion. Coercion is when someone uses force or intimidation to make you do something.

A core dimension of freedom of religion or belief is that everyone has the right to have or to change their religion or belief. Another way of putting this is that religion or belief and their expression are voluntary.

The right to protection from coercion elaborates on this. No-one, not the state, religious leaders or any other person or group, has the right to force their beliefs or practices on others. Neither to make them have, keep nor change their religion or belief.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 18 paragraph 2

“No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”

This dimension not only bars states from coercing people, it also gives states a duty to protect people from threats or violence that they face from other people or groups in society.

None the less, around the world we see examples of coercion in the form of threats, violence or punishments such as fines or imprisonment. Coercion can also be more subtle, like offering jobs in exchange for conversion, or stopping people’s access to health and education if they leave or refuse to adopt a religion or belief.

Sometimes the state is involved in coercion, either officially through legislation, or via the actions of officials at the local level.

The Baha’i community is the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran. Since the 1979 revolution, Baha’is have been systematically persecuted as a matter of government policy in an attempt to force them to convert to Islam. During the 10 years following the revolution, over 200 Baha’is were killed, hundreds were tortured or imprisoned, and tens of thousands lost jobs, access to education and other rights, solely because of their religious belief.

As of December 2017, there were 97 Baha’i prisoners of conscience in Iran, including six national-level Baha’i leaders.

This example illustrates the connection between discrimination and coercion. Baha'is in Iran are banned from going to university and from employment in the civil service. This discriminatory law is coercive. When a student or employee is discovered to be a Baha'i they face the choice between converting to Islam, and losing their position.

Sometimes violent nationalist or extremist groups coerce people to change their religion or beliefs. The so called Islamic state, Daesh forced both Yezidis and Christians to convert, and murdered people who refuse. While in India, forced conversions to Hinduism have been documented in connection with communal violence involving Hindu nationalists. In Myanmar, there are documented cases of the army forcing Christians to recant their faith and convert to Buddhism at gun point. And in parts of the Central African Republic, Muslims have also been threatened with being shot unless they convert to Christianity.

Although the ban on coercion formally applies to people's ability to have, adopt or change their religion or belief, many people also experience both state and societal coercion in relation to the practice of religion. An issue that illustrates this coercion is women's clothing. Some countries legally require women to wear religious clothing, while others ban women from doing so. And women can face harassment from people outside their faith community if they wear religious clothing and from people within their own faith community if they do not.

Lots of different people can be affected by coercion. In many countries, people whose religious ideas or practices differ from state ideology or from the social norm are affected by coercion. Minorities, atheists, converts or people with religions considered 'foreign' to the context are often affected. And within religious groups, people considered to be heretics, blasphemers or considered to be failing to practice their religion properly can be affected by coercion to change their beliefs and practices, coercion that comes from the state, their family or community.

To sum up, coercion can involve threats, violence, discrimination or punishments such as fines or imprisonment, and can come from the state, or from people and groups in the community. In saying that no-one shall be subject to coercion, international human rights law not only bars states from coercing people, it also gives states a duty to protect people by acting in an efficient way to prevent and stop coercion in society.

You can find more information about protection from coercion, including texts of human rights documents that refer to it, in the training materials on the website.

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