



Reports

Camila Sánchez-Sandoval

Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Religious Freedom

2025 / 20

International Institute
for Religious Freedom



International Institute
for Religious Freedom

**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
Instituto Internacional para la Libertad Religiosa**

The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom – beyond anecdotal evidence – to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the International Journal for Religious Freedom and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a “meeting place” for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

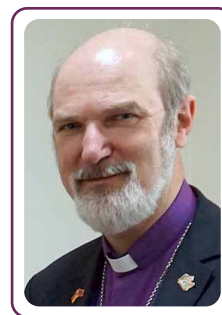
We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



Dr. Dennis P. Petri
(V.i.S.d.P.)
International Director



Dr. Kyle Wisdom
Deputy Director



**Prof. Dr. mult. Thomas
Paul Schirmacher**
*President of the
Academic/Editorial
Board*



**Prof. Dr. Janet
Epp Buckingham**
*Executive Editor
of the International
Journal for
Religious Freedom
(IJRF)*

Camila Sánchez-Sandoval

Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Religious Freedom

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Camila Sánchez-Sandoval, PhD, is a Research Fellow for the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF). She holds a PhD in Social Sciences with a minor in Political Science from the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO-Mexico), where she received an “Outstanding Thesis” distinction for her research titled “Religious Freedom in Mexico and Colombia: An Approach to Expansion Categories and Public Policy Actions from a Comparative Public Policy Perspective.” She also holds a Master’s degree in Sociology from the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City and a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science from the Universidad del Tolima. Currently, she works as an independent consultant in public policy evaluation in Mexico. Her research interests include Religious Freedom, Public Policy, Politics and Religion, and Research Methodologies.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|---|
| Introduction..... | 5 |
| Democracy and Religious Freedom: An Inevitable Marriage?..... | 6 |
| Religious Freedom as a Democratic Barometer | 7 |
| Autocracy and Religious Freedom..... | 8 |
| By Way of Conclusion..... | 8 |

Introduction

The world is going through a decisive moment in the history of governance and human rights. According to the V-Dem 2025 report,¹ nearly three-quarters of the global population—72 %—now live under autocratic regimes, the highest percentage since 1978. For the first time in more than twenty years, there are more autocracies (91) than democracies (88). In addition, about 3.1 billion people—roughly 40 % of humanity—live in countries experiencing processes of autocratization.

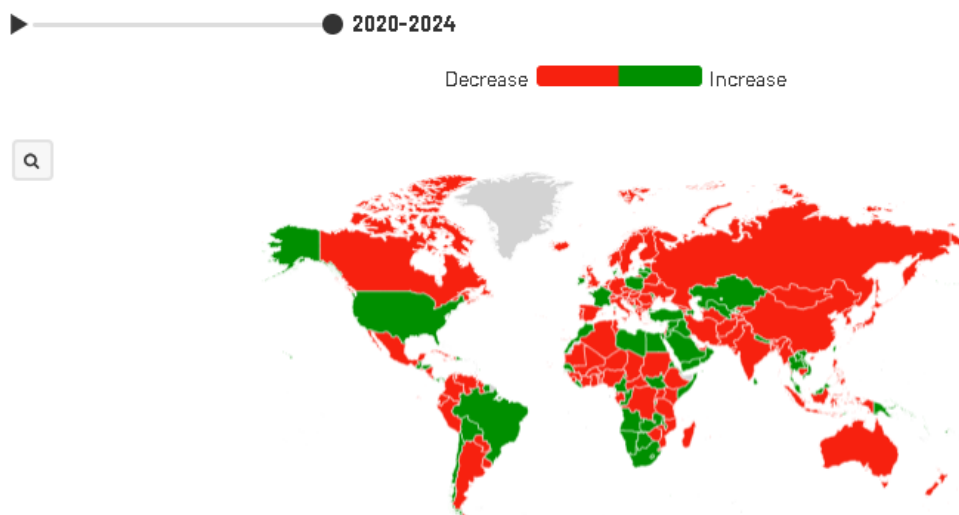
The report clarifies the key concepts behind these political changes. Democratization refers to progress toward greater democracy: it may occur when a country moves from an authoritarian regime toward greater political freedoms (liberalization), or when an existing democracy is strengthened (deepening). In contrast, autocratization is a regression: it occurs when a democracy begins to weaken (democratic backsliding) or when an autocracy becomes more rigid (hardening). Based on these processes, V-Dem classifies countries into four types of regimes: closed autocracies, electoral autocracies, electoral democracies, and liberal democracies. This classification shows that the world is not simply black or white (democracy versus autocracy), but instead contains multiple shades of gray, with many countries occupying intermediate or “gray zone” positions.

The most recent map from the Global State of Democracy Initiative graphically² illustrates this reality: between 2020 and 2024, most countries experienced setbacks in representation, rights, rule of law, and participation. The result is a world largely colored in red, with only a few exceptions in green that symbolize progress.

¹ V-Dem Institute. (2025). Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped? https://v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf

² Tostevin, M. & Feng, J. (2025, September 11). Map Shows Worldwide Fight Over Democracy. *Newsweek*. <https://newsweek.com/map-shows-worldwide-fight-over-democracy-2127588>

Figure 1. Democracy in Decline: Ranking representation, rights, rule of law and participation across the world



Source: Global State of Democracy Initiative (<https://www.idea.int/gsod/>)

Democracy and Religious Freedom: An Inevitable Marriage?

Amid these alarming figures, a key question arises: what are the implications of democratic decline for religious freedom? Can we assume that democracy automatically guarantees this right, and that autocracy systematically denies it?

The answer is more complex than it seems. Democracy creates favorable conditions to protect various freedoms, such as religious freedom, but it does not always guarantee them in practice. At the same time, some authoritarian regimes tolerate certain religious practices, though under conditions far from genuinely free.

An illustrative example of tensions within democracies can be found in India. Although it is the most populous country in the world and holds regular elections, multiple international reports document restrictions and hostility toward religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. For instance, USCIRF notes that in at least 12 states there are anti-conversion laws that ban conversions, require government notification, and presume guilt for violators.³ USCIRF also reports that “throughout 2024, individuals were killed, beaten, and lynched by vigilante groups; religious leaders were arbitrarily arrested; and homes and places of worship were demolished.”⁴ In addition, Amnesty International warns

³ Wilson, L. (2023, March). India’s State-Level Anti-Conversion Laws. *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. <https://uscirf.gov/publications/indias-state-level-anti-conversion-laws>

⁴ USCIRF (2024, October 2). USCIRF Releases Report on India’s Collapsing Religious Freedom Conditions. *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. <https://www.uscirtf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirtf-releases-report-indias-collapsing-religious-freedom-conditions>

that homes belonging to Muslims were demolished in at least five states as a form of punishment, with religious properties destroyed.⁵ All of this occurs within an electoral regime, demonstrating that democracy alone is not sufficient to guarantee religious freedom.

At the other end of the spectrum, some authoritarian regimes allow a certain degree of religious practice, as long as it does not threaten the state's power. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the government bans the public practice of non-Muslim religions, though it permits private worship under strict conditions (such as notifying authorities and using approved materials).⁶ However, there is no legal pathway for non-Muslim religious communities to formally register, preventing them from opening bank accounts or operating with institutional recognition. In the United Arab Emirates, temples and churches have been built on land donated by members of the ruling family, and certain state-sponsored interfaith complexes have been inaugurated recently.⁷ Yet this openness depends entirely on the state, and the autonomy of these communities remains limited.

Religious Freedom as a Democratic Barometer

Several scholars have emphasized that religious freedom functions as a key indicator of democratic quality. As Brian Grim and Roger Finke remind us in *The Price of Freedom Denied*,⁸ when this right is respected, levels of violence decrease and social stability increases, because diversity is recognized and minorities are protected. Conversely, when freedom of belief is restricted, other fundamental liberties often erode, raising alarms about democratic solidity.

In the same vein, the comparative research of Jonathan Fox and the Religion and State Project⁹ shows that even consolidated democracies maintain forms of legal or practical discrimination against religious minorities. This reveals that electoral democracy alone does not guarantee this right unless it is accompanied by a genuine commitment to human rights and civil liberties. In this sense, the quality of democracy, beyond the mere existence of free elections, is decisive: where institutional checks and balances are respected and plural participation is encouraged, religious freedom finds greater opportunities for fulfillment.

⁵ Amnesty International (2024, February 7). India: Authorities must immediately stop unjust targeted demolition of Muslim properties – new reports. <https://amnesty.org/?p=206548>

⁶ Miller, H. (2024, August). Assessing Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia in the Context of Vision 2030. *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. <https://uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/2024%20Saudi%20Arabia%20Country%20Update.pdf>

⁷ Freedom House. (2024). United Arab Emirates. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-world/2024>

⁸ Grim, B. J., & Finke, R. (2010). *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511762345>

⁹ Fox, J. (2019, February 10). The Religion and State Project, Round 3. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/GCW4T>

Autocracy and Religious Freedom

Authoritarian regimes rarely eliminate religious practice entirely, but its recognition is often instrumental. As comparative studies on religion and politics show, religion can be used to legitimize the regime, enhance its international image, or manage social tensions. In this way, some freedoms are allowed, but only as long as they do not challenge the established power.

The problem is that such tolerance is often selective and subordinate. As Farrah Raza explains in her analysis of the reports by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the mandate emphasizes that “the right to freedom of religion or belief cannot be used as a weapon to oppress or to destroy the basic rights and freedoms of others.”¹⁰ Raza also highlights the need for public engagement with religious leaders and communities to prevent majorities from imposing their vision and marginalizing minorities. In this sense, in authoritarian regimes, religious freedom is not recognized as a guaranteed human right, but rather as a fragile concession dependent on political convenience.

By Way of Conclusion

Finally, I would like to close this reflection by noting that global democratic backsliding is not only a political issue but also a direct challenge to religious freedom. History and recent data show that this right does not automatically flourish in democracies, nor does it completely disappear in autocracies. What truly matters are institutional quality, respect for minorities, and the constant vigilance of civil society to safeguard these rights.

Protecting religious freedom is a barometer of democratic health. When this right is respected, societies are more stable and just. When it is restricted, democracy begins to crack. At a time when there are more autocracies than democracies, actively defending religious freedom is more urgent than ever.

¹⁰ Raza, F. (2024, March 26). The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief: Key reports, themes, and issues. *Oxford Human Rights Hub*. <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/the-un-special-rapporteur-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-key-reports-themes-and-issues/>

Imprint

Address

International Institute for Religious Freedom
P. O. Box 780068
Orlando, Florida 32878
United States of America

Friedrichstr. 38
2nd Floor
53111 Bonn
Germany

International Director: Dr. Dennis P. Petri (V.i.S.d.P.)
Research Director: Prof. Dr. Christof Sauer
Executive Editor of the IJRF: Prof. Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham
President: Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

Contact: info@iirf.global

Occassional journal with special reports, research projects, reprints and documentation published by VKW Culture and Science Publ.

Follow us:





International Institute
for Religious Freedom

International Institute for Religious Freedom

Bonn | Brussels | Cape Town
Colombo | Brasília | Delhi
Tübingen | Vancouver

iirf.global • info@iirf.global