



11th International Conference

Religious Freedom in Asia: Representation, Restriction, Rights

20–21 August 2026 | Bangkok, Thailand

1. Background

Asia Centre's 11th Annual International Conference will examine the current state and future trajectory of religious freedom in Asia, focusing on representation, restrictions and rights. The right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is fundamental to human dignity. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) ([1948](#)) enshrines the inalienable right to adopt, change, or renounce a religion without coercion or discrimination – a principle further reinforced by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ([1966](#)).

Yet, the state of FoRB in Asia in 2025 reflects more regression than progress. Countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Thailand have seen rising sectarian tensions and violence ([ACLED Asia Pacific Team, 2025](#)). In the same year, Afghanistan, India, and Vietnam were designated countries of particular concern for their severe and systematic violations ([Koh, 2025](#)). Only a few, such as Japan and Timor-Leste, consistently recorded low levels of restrictions and sectarian hostilities. ([Majumdar, 2024](#)).

As such, FoRB is often a contested right in Asia. This is reflected in more than half the countries in the region scoring above moderate levels of challenges to religious freedom. According to the Pew Research Center ([2024](#)), 10 out of 50 countries in the Asia-Pacific region scored high on both the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and the Social Hostilities Index (SHI) in 2022 ([Ibid.](#)). Noteworthy, 15 out of 50 from the Asia-Pacific region were classified as “high” in the GRI but “low” in the SHI ([Ibid.](#)).

High levels of government restrictions and social hostilities are particularly prevalent in South and Southeast Asia. For instance, in 2025, the government of India is pushing to implement the Citizenship Amendment Act risks millions of Muslims becoming stateless ([Justice For All, 2025](#)). This is coupled with communal rioting, anti-conversion laws and social discrimination that render minorities like Muslims, Christians, and Dalits vulnerable ([Pew Research Center, 2021](#)). In Myanmar, religious freedom violations are state-sanctioned, persecuting minorities like Christians and the Rohingya Muslim population ([Wahyuningrum, 2025](#)). Following the 2021 military coup, such ethno-religious tensions have heightened. For instance, in 2024, airstrikes were launched on worshippers of the Saint Peter Baptist Church in the Sagaing region ([International Christian Concern, 2025](#)).

Patterns of high government restrictions with low social hostilities are more prevalent in the Asia-Pacific region. This highlights the relevance of authoritarian governance favouring one or more religions over others or antagonising religious establishments entirely ([Majumdar, 2024](#)). Countries like Afghanistan demonstrate this by imposing strict interpretations of Shari'a through a systematic use of physical and sexual violence ([OHCHR, 2025](#)). In North Korea, the ruling ideology frames religion as a threat to the country, imprisoning South

Asia Centre

65/168, Chamnan Phenjati Business Center Building, 20th Fl.,
Rama 9 Rd., Huai Kwang, Huai Kwang, Bangkok 10310 Thailand
Tel: (+66)2 129 3773 Email: info@asiacentre.org Website: asiacentre.org

Korean missionaries in 2024 for diverting the loyalty of North Koreans from the rulers ([Walden, 2025](#)).

More than that, FoRB across Asia is often shaped by contradictory approaches. Tolerance of religious diversity tends to be conditional, prioritising the maintenance of social order instead. For instance, Indonesia justified blocking the Religious Harmony Forums in late 2024, forcing the closure of 1,500-2,200 places of worship for minorities such as Christians, Buddhists, and Indigenous faith groups ([Harsono, 2018](#)). Cases like this indicate that the majoritarian constructs harmony. As such, religious freedom requires reconceptualisation as a true human right instead of being managed by tolerance frameworks that enable discriminatory practices.

Emerging challenges are also transnational. The misuse of surveillance technologies raises concerns over the targeted repression of religious groups beyond borders. For instance, the Chinese government targets diasporic Uyghurs and Tibetans through spyware and cyberattacks ([USCIRF, 2024](#)). Governments like Myanmar adopted these tactics of techno-authoritarianism against minorities like the Rohingya. In addition to uncivil societies spreading disinformation and state inaction, civic spaces for religious minorities are at risk of erosion ([Marshall, 2019](#)).

While challenges to religious freedom are not novel, the longstanding efforts to address these issues indicate that tolerance is not enough ([Rieffer-Flanagan, 2019](#)). These evolving difficulties require updated frameworks for rights-based advocacy, legal reform, and institutional monitoring that advance FoRB. Civil society actors across the region have played an essential role in challenging these restrictions. This includes documenting abuses, litigating violations, or advocating for legal reforms to bring domestic law into compliance with international norms.

In this context, the conference will examine religious freedom in Asia as a human rights issue, based on legal standards, state responsibility, and institutional accountability. By convening stakeholders from a range of organisations, the event seeks to identify threats to religious freedom, foster dialogue and develop actionable frameworks. This is to ensure that religious freedom is a justiciable right that states are obligated to protect and individuals are empowered to claim. It is hoped that insights gained from the conference will inform effective practices and support policy development that recognises religious freedom as integral to broader democratic and human rights commitments, while fostering a community of practice.

2. Conference Themes

The conference will examine the following sub-themes:

- FoRB as a Human Right: International Norms and Domestic Obligations
- Legal and Structural Restrictions on Religious Freedom
- Division Between Secular and Religious Courts
- The Bureaucratic Control of Religion
- Religious Freedom in Conflict Zones and Authoritarian Regimes

- Transnational Repression of Religious Activists and Asylum-Seekers
- Religious Fundamentalism, State-Sanctioned Religion and the Erosion of Pluralism
- Uncivil Society and Social Hostilities against FoRB
- Representation and Marginalisation of Ethno-Religious Minorities
- Online Harassment and Surveillance of Religious Communities
- Gender, Religion, and Intersectional Discrimination
- Indigenous People, Atheists, and Non-Believers
- From Tolerance to Accountability: Responses from Civil Society and Media

Note: The above sub-themes are a preliminary guide. Flexibility is encouraged, and partners may propose additional topics aligned with their expertise under the overarching theme of Religious Freedom in Asia to ensure contextual relevance and innovation.

3. Objectives

The conference aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Examine the state of religious freedom in Asia.
2. Identify threats to religious freedom and current responses.
3. Build strategies and actions for advancing religious freedom in the region.

4. Conference Structure

The conference will consist of short opening remarks, keynote speeches, plenary sessions, and breakout sessions arranged according to themes and/or region and country-specific discussions.

5. Conference Participants

Registration is open to participants from national, regional, and global organisations, including civil society organisations, faith-based NGOs, human rights organisations, media and journalism associations, legal and policy entities, parliaments and political parties, technology firms, government agencies, and intergovernmental organisations.