



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia: Techno-Authoritarianism and Transnational Influences

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Chair

Good afternoon and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on *Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia: Techno-Authoritarianism and Transnational Influences*. Thank you very much to our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to offer their insight on this important topic.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy

recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

In today's hearing, we will look at how emerging trends in technology and influences from outside the region are impacting religious freedom in member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN. We will also consider how the U.S. government can more effectively combat repressive transnational influence that seeks to destroy religious freedom and other related human rights.

Despite growing civil society activism and economic development, religious freedom conditions throughout Southeast Asia continue to stagnate or, in many places, decline. The rise of technology and digital surveillance, alongside other transnational influences from outside the region, place religious freedom under increasing threat. The Burmese military disseminates hate speech and calls for widespread violence through social media to perpetrate atrocities against the predominantly Muslim Rohingya. In Indonesia, blasphemy charges increasingly cite social media as the source of the offending incident. Across Southeast Asia, transnational influences, particularly from China and Saudi Arabia, threaten to change the political and legal landscape with major consequences for religious freedom and related human rights.

In last year's Annual Report USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate Burma and Vietnam as Countries of Particular Concern, or CPCs, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. We also recommended that Indonesia and Malaysia be placed on the State Department's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom. The State Department has designated Burma as a CPC and placed Vietnam on the Special Watch List but has not taken similar action on Indonesia or Malaysia.

I will now hand it over to my colleague, Vice Chair Fred Davie, for his opening remarks.