



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

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

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Frederick A. Davie, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you, Chair Cooper, and thank you also to our witnesses for joining us today.

As our chair mentioned, religious freedom conditions throughout Southeast Asia continue to stagnate or decline. As USCIRF reporting highlights, blasphemy charges remain widespread in Indonesia and Malaysia. Restrictive legal codes, such as Brunei's Shari'a Penal Code and the recently passed Indonesian Criminal Code, further criminalize blasphemy and restrict religious freedom. They do so, in part, through the laws and practices that permit digital surveillance. The bureaucratic regulation of religion by many nations in ASEAN has brought matters of faith into the domain of official government policy. Governments are

increasingly using technology to interfere in individual's lives to enforce laws that regulate religious practice. In some places, such as Malaysia, it is no longer an individual's choice to determine their faith identity or to convert to a religion or belief, to dress according to their conscience, to marry across religious lines, and so on. These are administrative issues requiring approval from a government agency. To defend these practices from international scrutiny, ASEAN members increasingly manipulate international human rights language in the name of preserving their cultural identity.

As is well documented, the most egregious atrocities in the region have been committed by the Burmese military against the predominantly Muslim Rohingya. Burmese authorities' use of technology to target Rohingya led, in part, to the explosion of violence and genocide in 2017. These actions sent millions of refugees throughout the wider region, threatening the economic and social stability of host countries who had nothing to do with the atrocities perpetrated in Burma. Religious freedom violations in one country, if left unchanged, can threaten the stability and development of neighboring countries.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. I will now pass the floor over to Commissioner Stephen Schneck for his remarks.