



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

May 2024

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA TECHNO-AUTHORITARIANISM AND TRANSNATIONAL INFLUENCES

Abraham Cooper  
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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

On January 25, 2024, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [\*Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia: Techno-Authoritarianism and Transnational Influences\*](#). Chair Abraham Cooper led the hearing and convened two panels of witnesses. The first panel discussed trends in technology and digital surveillance throughout Southeast Asia impacting religious freedom. The second panel discussed transnational influences from outside of Southeast Asia, such as China and Saudi Arabia, that affect the religious freedom landscape in the region.

[\*Rep. Mike Gallagher\*](#) (R-WI) provided recorded remarks on the Chinese government's practices that impact religious freedom and the transnational influence of these tactics.

[\*Rep. Ted Lieu\*](#) (D-CA) provided recorded remarks on the importance of international standards of religious freedom.

[\*Chair Cooper\*](#) opened the hearing with remarks noting the general stagnation or decline of religious freedom throughout Southeast Asia. He stated that this decline has occurred alongside the rise of technology and digital surveillance and is informed by external transnational influence. Chair Cooper finished by noting that USCIRF recommends Burma and Vietnam as Countries of Particular Concern for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, and he recommends that Indonesia and Malaysia be placed on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom.

[\*Vice Chair Fred Davie\*](#) called attention to the continued enforcement and development of legal codes that restrict religious freedom across Southeast Asia. Vice Chair Davie noted the increasing use of digital surveillance by governments to uphold these restrictive legal codes. He also highlighted the role of state bureaucracies in regulating individual and community religious affairs through administrative practices that restrict religious freedom.

[\*Commissioner Stephen Schneck\*](#) highlighted the use of new technologies by countries in Southeast Asia to bolster authoritarian practices and consolidate power, often at the expense of religious minorities and religious expression. Commissioner Schneck noted that China exports its technologies and state practices globally, including to Southeast Asia.

[\*Kirril Shields\*](#) of the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect at the University of Queensland, Australia, provided testimony on the region's lack of regulation in the digital world and its effect on religious freedom. Shields highlighted that this lack of regulation, coupled with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) noninterference in domestic issues, have enabled political actors to use the digital sphere to pursue policies that restrict religious freedom. He also highlighted

the ongoing use of social media by religious leaders to promote religious intolerance. Shields called on the U.S. government to:

- Question social media companies over their role in inciting religious hatred throughout Southeast Asia;
- Encourage a more proactive ASEAN that looks to models, such as the European Union's legislation on social media and artificial intelligence, to grow and foster religious tolerance via the development and adoption of regional laws and an ASEAN jurisdiction; and
- Work with ASEAN and the ASEAN Secretary General to develop educational programs that foster religious tolerance throughout the region;

He also urged the U.S. Congress to:

- Increase funding to Southeast Asian civil society organizations to provide education on how social media works;
- Raise the region of Southeast Asia in Congressional hearings that question the role of social media; and
- Expand the State Department's Atrocity Prevention Education Program to incorporate Southeast Asian government officials and include a module on how the digital world spreads hate and disinformation that reduces religious freedom. This initiative is in line with the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act.

[\*Michelle Lee\*](#), Graduate Researcher at Columbia University, provided testimony on the Burmese military's use of high-tech surveillance and ongoing repression against Rohingya. She stated how these tactics mirrored Chinese techniques used against the Uyghur community in Xinjiang, China. Lee emphasized that the use of this technology demonstrates a transnational influence throughout the region originating from the Chinese government's development of techno-authoritarianism.

Lee called on the U.S. government to:

- Pursue open dialogue with the Chinese government on joint efforts to provide aid to address the Rohingya refugee crisis;
- Document surveillances tactics and human rights violations; and
- Support protection for the fundamental rights of Rohingya.

[\*Rana S. Inboden\*](#), Senior Fellow with the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law, University of Texas at Austin, discussed tactics the Chinese government employs to coopt and weaken the United Nations (UN)

human rights system. She explained that China does this to evade accountability for human rights violations while setting the model for other countries to follow, such as those in Southeast Asia. Inboden noted that China has been a leading country hindering the effectiveness of the Universal Periodic Review.

Inboden called on the U.S. government to:

- Ensure U.S. diplomats have the resources they need in Geneva at UN human rights bodies;
- Focus on cross-regional collaboration at the Human Rights Council;
- Commit to participate in the Human Rights Council; and
- Persist in utilizing tools in the UN to highlight human rights abuses abroad.

[\*James Chin\*](#), Professor of Asian Studies, University of Tasmania, discussed Saudi Arabia's decades-long export of its brand of Islam, Wahabism, into Malaysia and Indonesia and its impact on religious freedom today. Professor Chin noted the development and proliferation of Islamic bureaucracies as an example of Saudi influence on political Islam in Malaysia. He also highlighted that the mainstreaming of Saudi religious perspectives has led to the creation of intolerant religious environments in both countries, informing government practices that curtail religious freedom.

[\*Andrew Khoo\*](#), Co-Chair, Constitutional Law Committee, Bar Council Malaysia, provided testimony on the state of religious freedom and international trends impacting these conditions in Malaysia. Khoo highlighted the Malaysian government's increasing criminalization of religious free speech under the guise of preventing violence. He stressed that the government has pursued this policy while simultaneously failing to prevent or counter Islamic extremism, even within the government, before it becomes violent. Khoo urged people-to-people contact between the United States and Malaysia and called on the U.S. government to promote interfaith activities.

Following the witnesses' testimony, Chair Cooper led an interactive question-and-answer session. Witnesses noted the likelihood that governments and political actors will continue to utilize social media to impinge on religious freedom and stoke religious hatred. Shields highlighted the apathy of social media companies regarding how actors use their platforms. Witnesses agreed companies have a financial motivation to remain apathetic.

Chair Cooper closed the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.