

REFLECTIONS ON

THE US STATE DEPARTMENT'S 1ST MINISTERIAL TO ADVANCE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

JULY 24 - 26, 2018



MINISTERIAL REFLECTIONS

From 24 - 26 July, 2018, the U.S. State Department invited 80 governments, over 175 civil society representatives, and more than 100 religious leaders to participate in the first ever Ministerial to advance international religious freedom. MPV's president Ani Zonneveld and U.N. representative Omair Paul were among the civil society representatives invited, and over the course of three days contributed to the Ministerial plenary and breakout sessions and engaged civil society and government representatives from across the world (and political spectrum).

In addition to attending Ministerial meetings, MPV organized a side event in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and the United States Institute of Peace entitled ***Engaging Transformative Religious Narratives for the Elimination of Violence Against Women***, and contributed to a panel organized by allies at Human Rights Campaign and Human Rights Watch entitled Religious Freedom in the Human Rights Framework.

We at MPV appreciate the State Department's efforts to ensure that a diversity of voices and opinions were heard, and note with appreciation the efforts made to exemplify the plight of religious minorities through several first-person testimonies, including those offered from a representative of the Muslim Uighur community in China and a Rohingya lawyer representing her community. Their stories of state-sponsored persecution are legitimate and dire, as were the stories of persecution recounted by Christian and Yazidi survivors of the terror and violence wrought by Daesh in Iraq and Syria.



No one can deny the veracity of these testimonies. In the same vein, we cannot avoid the truth that certain actors utilized this space to promulgate subtle biases against Muslims and Islam, and to promote potentially destabilizing theo-political agendas that ultimately reflect the domestic and foreign policy imperatives of problematic lobbyist groups. We also cannot ignore the fact that recognized hate groups were invited to the Ministerial and used the space to invoke twisted interpretations of religious freedom in order to justify their bigotry and explicit anti-LGBTQI animus. We unequivocally rebuke this behavior and are disturbed by how welcomed this hate was by other invitees. Furthermore, we affirm these narratives and understandings of religious freedom undermine the authenticity, integrity, and inclusiveness of the administration's objectives to respect and protect freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental human rights here in the U.S. and abroad.

MPV took every opportunity to challenge these rights-diminishing narratives and understandings by vocalizing our concerns at both the Ministerial plenary meetings and during thematic breakout sessions.

During the breakout discussion on "religious freedom and women's rights," Ani represented MPV and delivered a statement—to a panel showing palpable bias against Muslims and Islam—regarding how the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, as advised by attorney Alan Dershowitz, may shield doctors here in the U.S. from accountability when they conscientiously perform female genital mutilation and cutting on young girls in certain religious communities, including the Dawoodi Bohra community in Detroit, Michigan.

During the "religious freedom and countering violent extremism" breakout session, Ani also challenged the administration to hold itself accountable to the same standards it holds violators of religious freedom abroad. As a human rights organization, when we challenge Muslim-majority countries on human rights abuses carried out on their soil in the name of Islam, including violations of the rights of religious minorities, we are told by state and non-state actors to "take care of our own backyard first."

MPV continued to push back against the blatant anti-Islam sentiment espoused during the session, as Ani responded to an individual who painted Islam as a monolithic and supremacist religion: “Supremacist ideologies are part of the problem that we Muslims need to undo, but what of American Christian legislators who institutionalize their interpretation of Christianity into law? How is this any different than the institutionalization of Sharia law?”

Omair Paul delivered a statement at the “religious freedom and economic prosperity” breakout session addressing the nexus between the abuse of religious freedom rhetoric to justify discrimination against LGBTQI people.

In addition to framing rights-diminishing religious and cultural fundamentalisms—which often seep into legislative and policy spaces under the guise of respecting and protecting “religious freedom” or “traditional family values”—as a threat to sustainable and equitable human and economic development, the statement served as a pointed response to the anti-LGBTQI hatred espoused during the plenary session just prior.

During that session, a representative of an organization recognized by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an anti-LGBT hate group took the floor to condemn the U.S. State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor’s imperatives to address and elevate the human rights situation of LGBTQI people internationally, framing these imperatives as incompatible with broader State Department initiatives to protect religious freedom and other human rights.

MPV also called on the government officials in attendance, including Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, to include Muslim women in policy-level consultations with Muslim communities. This directive was couched in the critique of U.S. government agencies’ and officials’ tendency to “default to the lowest hanging fruit,” i.e. mainstream and well-funded Muslim organizations that are often male dominated and that subscribe to patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

To further advance the conversation on the role of progressive and inclusive faith based organizations in eliminating violence against women and girls, MPV co-organized a side event entitled ***Engaging Transformative Religious Narratives for the Elimination of Violence Against Women***. The event addressed rising tides of religious and cultural fundamentalisms and extremisms—in both the global north and south—that undergird violence against women and girls, and showcased inclusive and rights-affirming faith based initiatives to challenge the weaponization of religious and cultural narratives and empower women and girls to achieve gender equity from within various faith traditions.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark** and Franz-Michael S. Mellbin, Danish Ambassador, Special Representative for Religious Freedom or Belief, and Reverend Susan Hayward of the **United States Institute of Peace** for their generous support in organizing the event. We would also like to thank the **International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development** (of which the government of Denmark is a member and MPV a partner) for their support as well.





MPV participated in another side event entitled ***Religious Freedom in the Human Rights Framework***, co-organized by colleagues and allies at the **Human Rights Campaign** and **Human Rights Watch**. The event addressed “how religious liberty coexists with other human rights guarantees, particularly those protecting the liberty and equality of marginalized groups.” Omair contributed as a panelist and spoke to the inroads that right-wing fundamentalist groups have made in certain UN spaces and detailed how these groups co-opt and corrupt human rights language to promote potentially rights violating interpretations of normative human rights standards. He also highlighted examples of violations to the right of freedom of religion or belief experienced by LGBTQI people and other sexual and gender minorities in specific Muslim societies. He affirmed that these violations are based on a prohibited grounds of discrimination and posited that states selectively respect and protect the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Both events created spaces to affirm international standards regarding freedom of religion or belief, and both exemplified inclusive and rights-affirming faith-based human rights work. These events were crucial in that they broadcasted a cross-sectoral, normative understanding of freedom of religion or belief, and in effect produced messaging that countered warped interpretations of religious freedom espoused elsewhere. We once again unequivocally rebuke this interpretation of religious freedom as it is used to shield from accountability fundamentalist groups who seek institutional support to exercise their freedom to persecute, hate, violate human rights, and finance the exportation of rights-diminishing religious narratives abroad.

In May 2018, MPV organized a **Symposium on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Cultural Rights and Women**, in partnership with Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and Dr. Karima Bennoune, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights. The Symposium sought to create a space in which religious and cultural narratives could be discussed in relation to the structures and attitudes that sustain patriarchal and misogynistic gender roles and stereotypes. Human rights experts and advocates, grassroots women's rights activists, faith-based organizations, and feminist and religious scholars were brought together as panelists to interrogate these themes, and to take stock of the reprisals and consequences women and girls experience when they speak out against rights violations in the name of religion or culture.

While opening the session on linkages and impacts between women's rights and the right to freedom of religion and belief, Dr. Shaheed remarked that ***"the human rights framework gives primacy to the protection of the rights of human beings, not of religions per se."*** We stand by and affirm this normative understanding of freedom of religion or belief and appreciate and acknowledge the importance of Dr. Shaheed's participation in the Ministerial, especially given its aim to "elevate the focus of religious freedom in regional and multilateral organizations within the international community."
