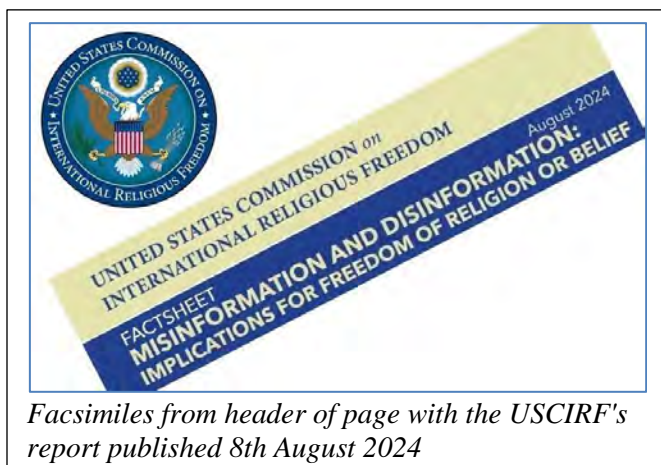


FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: USA says governments like Japan spread false claims about religious minorities

Knut Holdhus
August 17, 2024



Facsimiles from header of page with the USCIRF's report published 8th August 2024

States use disinformation: Religious freedom head says U.S. report on freedom of religion should include Japan among states painting black picture of minority religions

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) issued on 8th August 2024 an important report titled "[Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)".

The report points out that governments are spreading false claims about religious

minorities. This can increase intolerance and violence and seriously restrict freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).



Countries like China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia use both misinformation and disinformation to target religious minorities, leading to harassment and violence.

Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate claims, whereas disinformation involves the intentional spread of such false or inaccurate claims.

The US report states,

"Governments spreading false claims about religious minorities represent a global challenge to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). As USCIRF has highlighted, social media and the internet allow these claims to spread faster and wider than ever before."



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, April 2023

According to the report, states restrict freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in two ways when spreading misinformation and disinformation about religious communities. Firstly, such false information can increase intolerance among individuals who believe these claims, leading them to harass, intimidate, or threaten certain religious groups. Secondly, it sends a message to minority faith communities that the government will not protect their religious freedoms and may even seek to limit them. This perception can make community members feel unsafe in practicing, teaching, worshiping, and observing their beliefs, causing many to self-censor or avoid exercising their religious freedom altogether.

BITTER WINTER In an [article 15th August](#) in [Bitter Winter](#), the leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights, Editor-in-Chief Dr. Massimo Introvigne, internationally well-known Italian sociologist of religion, praises the American report, but adds that it could have included that also several democratic states spread disinformation about religious minorities.

Introvigne points out that these tactics are also employed by governments in democratic countries. The United Nations has condemned the falsehoods spread against the [Unification Church](#) and Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan. Argentina endorses debunked "brainwashing" theories to discriminate against religious minorities and accuse them of human trafficking. Courts in France and Belgium have found governmental anti-cult agencies guilty of spreading false information about Jehovah's Witnesses. Governmental reports on child sexual abuse in countries like Australia and New Zealand have also misrepresented Jehovah's Witnesses' stance on abuse. China and Russia are not the only nations spreading disinformation against marginalized minorities.

The US report mentions steps taken to combat disinformation from governments,

"In January 2024, the U.S. Department of State released a Framework to Counter Foreign State Information Manipulation, which calls for ensuring the "protection of marginalized groups" from misinformation and disinformation. The framework has been endorsed by Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom. It is also the basis of several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with countries including Bulgaria, Japan, Albania, Latvia, Moldova, Republic of Korea, and Poland. In its ongoing promotion of this framework, it is critical that the U.S. government and its multilateral partners also emphasize the profound harms that government misinformation and disinformation have on the ability of targeted religious groups to exercise their right to FoRB."

The report urges continued development of strategies to counter misinformation and disinformation to protect Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB).

Text: Knut Holdhus

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Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Introduction

Governments spreading false claims about religious minorities represent a global challenge to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). As USCIRF has [highlighted](#), social media and the internet allow these claims to spread faster and wider than ever before. These false claims take the form of misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is a claim that is false or inaccurate, while disinformation is a claim that is false or inaccurate that is deliberately disseminated. Increasingly, governments are promoting both misinformation and disinformation through campaigns targeting religious communities and by denying the existence of official policies targeting such groups.

Government misinformation or disinformation can increase the risk of [violence](#) that targets religious minorities. States propagating misinformation and disinformation about religious individuals are creating an environment enabling violations of their international legal right to FoRB. Articles 18 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), respectively, provide robust protections for an individual's right to freedom of religion or belief. This protection has two parts. First, individuals have the right to "freedom of thought, conscience, and religion," which includes the right of individuals to freely adhere to and change to any religion or belief of their choice. Second, individuals have the right to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching, alone or in community with others and in public or in private. This [includes](#), but is not limited to, the freedom to observe holidays and days of rest, wear distinctive clothing or head coverings, choose religion or belief leaders, prepare and distribute religion or belief texts, and establish religious or belief schools.

When governments propagate misinformation and disinformation about these communities, they restrict FoRB in two ways. First, misinformation and disinformation can amplify intolerance from individuals who may believe the content of these campaigns and harass, intimidate, or threaten the targeted religious groups.

USCIRF's Mission

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

Second, misinformation and disinformation signals to targeted religious communities that governments will not ensure their freedom of religion or belief and may actively seek to restrict it. These signals affect community members' perception of how safe it is for them to teach, practice, worship, and observe their religious beliefs. Many may self-censor or otherwise shy away from exercising FoRB as a result.

In January 2024, the U.S. Department of State [released](#) a Framework to Counter Foreign State Information Manipulation, which calls for ensuring the “protection of marginalized groups” from misinformation and disinformation. The framework has been [endorsed](#) by Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom. It is also the basis of several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with countries including [Bulgaria](#), [Japan](#), [Albania](#), [Latvia](#), [Moldova](#), [Republic of Korea](#), and [Poland](#). In its ongoing promotion of this framework, it is critical that the U.S. government and its multilateral partners also emphasize the profound harms that government misinformation and disinformation have on the ability of targeted religious groups to exercise their right to FoRB.

Select Examples of Misinformation and Disinformation Targeting Religious Communities

China

China [uses](#) several disinformation tactics to manipulate global opinion about its ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity targeting predominately Muslim Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in the Xinjiang region. Online actors working at the behest of Chinese authorities overload search engines and social media feeds to drown out critical information and criticism of state policies in Xinjiang. These actors have engaged in fake grassroots campaigns to give the appearance of widespread public support for China's purported economic development in the region. They have also boosted fabricated positive stories about life in Xinjiang, featuring Uyghurs who deny allegations of state mistreatment. Pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) online accounts have harassed Uyghur diaspora communities to stop members from criticizing the Chinese government and telling their personal experiences of state abuse.

Additionally, Chinese officials have selectively [invited](#) CCP-sympathetic diplomats, journalists, religious scholars, and others on carefully curated tours of Xinjiang

with Uyghurs who promote state talking points about life in the region and have been forced to deny their own torture and ill treatment at the risk of additional mistreatment. Authorities have begun allowing tourists to come to Xinjiang in what human rights activists decry as “[genocide tourism](#),” further spreading propaganda and exploiting Uyghur suffering.

India

The use and dissemination of misinformation and disinformation by Indian government officials has contributed to increased hate speech toward religious minorities, specifically Muslims. Ahead of India's 2024 national elections, for example, Legislative Assembly [members](#) affiliated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) used [disinformation](#) and [hateful](#) rhetoric against Muslims to gather political support among certain Hindu voters. In April 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi [referred](#) to Muslims, who have lived in India since the 16th century, as “infiltrators” and [claimed](#) without justification that opposition leaders would distribute confiscated wealth from Hindus to Muslims. Modi [continued](#) to proliferate these claims in subsequent campaign speeches. Union Home Minister Amit Shah echoed these statements and [insisted](#) falsely that opposition leaders would impose Shari'a if elected. There was no mention of Shari'a or Muslims in the opposition [election manifesto](#). False claims about religious groups in India exacerbate restrictions on FoRB, particularly in the context of ongoing [mob attacks](#) on religious minority groups.

The Indian government has also made concerted efforts to distort and omit factual records related to both [historical contributions](#) made by religious minorities and significant acts of intolerance toward them. In 2023, for example, the National Council of Education Research and Training, established by the Ministry of Education, published [new textbooks](#) that removed references to Muslims, including the 2002 riots in Gujarat that resulted in the death of hundreds of Muslims.

Iran

Iran's government systematically disseminates disinformation about religious minorities and tolerates misinformation targeting these groups. As USCIRF has [reported](#), this disinformation targets Jews, Sunni Muslims, Gonabadi Sufis, Christian converts from Islam, and Baha'is. It is often disseminated through state media outlets.

Iranian state-linked media have [claimed](#) falsely or without evidence that the Jewish holiday of Purim is a celebration of the mass murder of Iranians; Sunnis are being indoctrinated with anti-Shi'a ideas at religious schools; Gonabadi Sufis are linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); and Christian converts from Islam are part of a "Zionist" network that poses a national security risk. These outlets have also spread extensive misinformation and disinformation about Baha'is, including claims that they are a "disloyal cult" and have attempted to gain undue influence over Iran's economy. Iran's government has also claimed falsely that protesting against the country's mandatory hijab laws is evidence of a psychiatric disorder. Iranian courts have [sentenced](#) several women to mandatory psychiatric treatment on this basis. Such false claims create a restrictive environment for FoRB in Iran in the context of arrests, imprisonment and sometimes executions of [Baha'is](#), [Gonabadi Sufis](#), [Christians](#), and members of the [Erfan-e-Halqeh](#) movement.

Pakistan

The Pakistani government, at both the local and national levels, proliferates disinformation targeting religious minorities. For example, through statements and actions, government institutions and officials promote negative public opinion of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. Pakistan's Telecommunication Authority (PTA), for example, has previously called for the [removal](#) of U.S.-based Ahmadi websites, claiming they "disseminate sacrilegious content." Additionally, high-ranking police officials often justify the arrest of Ahmadis by [claiming](#) without evidence that their religious activity will "cause deterioration of law and order." Such justifications were used in June 2024, when police across Punjab issued orders to detain over 30 Ahmadis to prevent them from sacrificing animals during Eid al-Adha.

Russia

The Russian government systematically [uses](#) disinformation as a weapon, including against religious minorities. Russia [weaponizes](#) antisemitism and Holocaust distortion to shape international discourse on its war in Ukraine. When Russian President Vladimir Putin announced Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine, he claimed that the goal was to "denazify" the country after falsely [accusing](#) Ukrainian government officials of being neo-Nazis and perpetrating "genocide" against Russians and Russian-speaking citizens. Russian government representatives and state media began publicly pushing a false "denazification" narrative that regularly devolved into antisemitism and Holocaust

distortion. When a journalist questioned Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in May 2022 about the seeming contradictions of "denazifying" a country by removing its Jewish leader, Lavrov [speculated](#) that Hitler "had Jewish blood, too" and added that "wise Jewish people say that the most ardent anti-Semites are usually Jews."

Russian disinformation has also targeted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, on explicitly religious grounds. President Putin has [referred](#) to President Zelenskyy as a "disgrace to the Jewish people" and [accused](#) the West of putting an "ethnic Jew" in charge to cover up Ukraine's "anti-human nature." More recently, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [referred](#) to President Zelenskyy as "a peculiar kind of Jew" as he sought to falsely blame Ukraine for March's Islamic State terrorist attack on a Moscow concert venue.

Russian government officials and state media waged disinformation campaigns [targeting](#) other religious minorities as well. In addition to denazification, Russian pro-war disinformation has [characterized](#) the invasion as a fight against "satanism" or what the Russian state considers "non-traditional" religious groups. In October 2022, then Assistant Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Alexei Pavlov [argued](#) for the "desatanization" of Ukraine, citing the degradation of traditional religious teachings and the flourishing of "neo-pagan cults." Pavlov specifically singled out as cults the Protestant Word of Life Church, Church of Scientology, Church of Satan, and [Chabad Lubavitch](#), one of the largest Jewish religious groups in Russia and Ukraine. Russian propaganda and state-backed personalities have [echoed](#) similar claims about dangerous Ukrainian "cults" operating in Russia. Another example is a Russian government-supported television channel that [accused](#) Jehovah's Witnesses, whose beliefs include elements of pacifism, of stockpiling ammunition and threatening Russian war efforts in Russian-occupied Crimea.

Conclusion

Governmental misinformation and disinformation against individuals or groups on the basis of their religious beliefs has growing and concerning implications for FoRB. Governments are increasingly using such tactics to threaten, harass, intimidate, and attack individuals and communities on the basis of their religious beliefs. The U.S. government, collaborating with like-minded governments, should continue to develop strategies to counter governments using misinformation and disinformation to encourage or justify restrictions on FoRB.



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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.

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USCIRF Warns Against Fake News About Religious Minorities Spread by Governments

08/15/2024 MASSIMO INTROVIGNE

A+ | A-

An excellent report focused on disinformation produced by non-democratic states such as Russia (quoting "Bitter Winter") and China. It could have added that some democratic states do just the same.

by Massimo Introvigne



Stephen Schneck (left) and Eric Ueland (right) the current Chair and Vice Chair of USCIRF. Source: USCIRF.

The spread of false information about religious minorities by governments is threatening the global right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). The rise of social media and internet platforms amplifies these falsehoods through both unintended misinformation and intentional disinformation. Government-led campaigns are often aimed at religious communities, sometimes even denying official policies against them. This propagation of lies not only endangers FoRB but also increases the potential for violence against vulnerable groups.

These are the main conclusions of a report released this month by the USCIRF, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Its Commissioners are appointed by the President and by Congressional leaders of both political parties.

According to the report, when governments spread false information about religious groups, they undermine FoRB in two main ways. First, fake news can lead to increased intolerance and potential harassment against these groups by people who believe the false narratives. Second, it suggests to these religious communities that the government won't protect, and might even infringe upon, their religious freedoms. This threat may cause individuals within these communities to conceal their beliefs or avoid practicing their religion openly due to concerns for their safety.

The report offers what it admits are "selected examples," warning that there are many more cases throughout the world of slander and fake news systematically spread by governments against religious minorities they persecute. In addition to some cases from Iran, India, and Pakistan (where the Ahmadiyya Community is especially targeted), the USCIRF discusses fake news about the Uyghurs in China and against different minority religions, including Evangelical churches, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Scientology in Russia.

The report denounces the "genocide tourism" to Xinjiang organized by the Beijing regime, where visitors are misled to believe that all is well in the region by being allowed to visit carefully selected locations only. Meanwhile in the West, "Online actors working at the behest of Chinese authorities overload search engines and social media feeds to drown out critical information and criticism of state policies in Xinjiang. These actors have engaged in fake grassroots campaigns to give the appearance of widespread public support for China's purported economic development in the region. They have also boosted fabricated positive stories about life in Xinjiang, featuring Uyghurs who deny allegations of state mistreatment. Pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) online accounts have harassed Uyghur diaspora communities to stop members from criticizing the Chinese government and telling their personal experiences of state abuse. Additionally, Chinese officials have selectively invited CCP-sympathetic diplomats, journalists, religious scholars,

and others on carefully curated tours of Xinjiang with Uyghurs who promote state talking points about life in the region and have been forced to deny their own torture and ill treatment at the risk of additional mistreatment."



Naïve foreign tourists visiting Xinjiang. AI elaboration of Chinese propaganda posters.

Quoting "Bitter Winter," the USCIRF also reports that, after having ridiculously accused Ukrainian leaders to be Nazis and Satanists, Russian propaganda spread by anti-cultists and state officials claims that Ukrainian and Western intelligence agencies are at work to spread "cults" and Satanic organizations in Russia. The USCIRF also mentions bizarre Russian fake news accusing the pacifist Jehovah's Witnesses of "stockpiling ammunition and threatening Russian war efforts in Russian-occupied Crimea."

The report states that government-promulgated misinformation and disinformation targeting people for their religious beliefs are increasingly alarming and impact FoRB in several countries. More governments are resorting to these methods to coerce, bully, and target individuals and groups due to their faith. The USCIRF concludes that U.S. should keep working with allies to devise ways to counteract such governmental tactics that promote limitations on FoRB.

The report sheds light on a crucial strategy used by the enemies of religious liberty: mobilizing governments to spread fake news on religious minorities. While applauding the document, "Bitter Winter" notes that these strategies also involve governments of democratic countries. The lies spread against the Unification Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan have been denounced by the United Nations themselves. Argentina supports discredited theories of "brainwashing" to discriminate against religious minorities and accuse them of human trafficking. Courts of law in both France and Belgium have found governmental anti-cult agencies guilty of spreading false information against the Jehovah's Witnesses. Governmental reports on child sexual abuse in several countries, including Australia and New Zealand, also misrepresented the position of Jehovah's Witnesses on abuse. China and Russia are not alone in spreading disinformation against stigmatized minorities.

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