The key to securing religious freedom in post-Arab Spring nations

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Since a series of protests and demonstrations began across the Middle East and North Africa in December 2010, three regimes have fallen: that of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and ruler Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

Besides, President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen has finally agreed to step down after delaying it for months following his initial announcement to do so in April that he would resign in 30 days in exchange for immunity. Syria, under the state of emergency since 1963, appears to be on the brink of a civil war and change may follow sooner or later. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki have both announced that they would not seek re-election when their respective terms end.

The wave of revolutions has achieved what was almost unimaginable until recently, but it has come at the cost of tens of thousands of human lives. About 30,000 people were killed in Libya, around 4,000 in Syria, roughly 1,800 in Yemen, at least 875 in Egypt, and over 233 in Tunisia, according to estimates.

Now a big question hangs over these countries – especially Tunisia, Egypt and Libya that have overthrown their authoritarian regimes, and Yemen and Syria which are expected to follow suit – whether the new elected governments, most likely dominated by "moderate" Islamists, will grant religious freedom to minorities or will they move towards repression?

The Freedom and Justice Party (the Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt and the Ennahda party in Tunisia are poised to form governments that would draw up their respective constitutions. In Libya, Transitional Council Chairman Mustapha Abdul Jalil has said that the country will be ruled by Sharia law and the Muslim Brotherhood organized its first public meeting in Benghazi in November. In Syria, there are serious concerns over the fate of the Christians if and when President Bashar Al Assad falls leading to the re-emergence of the conservative Sunni leadership. In

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Yemen, a two-year transition period is expected to follow in which a national unity government will amend the constitution.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Libya and other influential Islamist groups like Ennahda in Tunisia have assured secularists, minorities and the international community that they will provide for equal rights of minorities. For example, Ennahda's chief Rashid Ghannouchi told The Washington Post recently that "religion is not in contradiction with democracy and not in contradiction with human rights and justice."

It is cautiously hoped that the Islamists will keep their promise. One of the reasons for hope is that the Islamists have not been able to win an absolute majority in the elections in Tunisia and Egypt thus far – and this trend may follow in Libya and elsewhere too – and they will have coalition governments with secular allies.

However, uncertainty and anxieties will remain among minorities. It is well known that the Islamist philosophy calls for the implementation of Islamic Sharia law and the establishment of an Islamic state, and that most Islamists reject democracy as a Western concept – after all, it is with such ideals that recruitment is fuelled, international affiliations are established, and funds are raised.

For example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt issued a detailed political platform in October 2007, calling for Muslim clerics to watch over the government and saying that only a Muslim man should be eligible for the president's office. The Freedom and Justice Party also rejects the candidacy of Coptic Christians for the presidency. It is difficult to believe that the revolutions have caused an ideological change among the Islamists. There is perhaps only a shift in the strategy.

It is not unlikely that the Islamists see democracy as a means to attain power, and once secure in office they may gradually begin to implement the ideology they are known for. For example, in Nepal, Maoists privately concede that their priority during the country's transition from the world's only Hindu kingdom to a democracy is gaining power, and policy issues will be dealt with at a later stage.

So the uncertainty that looms over the post-revolution countries should not be left to time alone. The litmus test to determine the intent of the Islamists is not far away. The first test will be the provisions the assemblies under their leadership propose in the new constitutions to be drafted. And that's the key for the international community to ensure religious freedom.

The permanence of constitutional provisions cannot be overemphasized. Take for example, Indonesia. The Pancasila – the five principles on which the state was established in 1945 – has guarded the country from a nationwide Sharia law, thanks to one man's foresight. The second draft of the Pancasila, known as the Jakarta Charter, carried a provision for the "obligation for all followers to observe Sharia law." But a national leader, Mohammad Hatta, removed it at the last minute based

on a request by a Christian representative, Alexander Andries Maramis. Until today, extremist groups in Indonesia are fighting for the inclusion of that provision.

It is extremely important for the international community to monitor the drafting of the constitutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere, as well as propose and lobby for full religious freedom and safeguards against any loopholes that could be used at a later stage to introduce restrictions on the rights of minorities and other citizens.

It's an overwhelming reality that the foundation of the ideological direction of several countries will be laid in the coming months. We must rise up to the occasion.

A response to the high counts of Christian martyrs per year

Thomas Schirrmacher[1]

For many years one number has been provided every year to report on the annual number of Christian martyrs. This is provided by the "Status of Global Mission." The number is quoted by various institutions but only produced by one institution. At present it is most frequently quoted by the papal missions agency "Aid to the Church in Need". It reports 130,000 – 170,000 martyrs per year but does not conduct any of its own investigations.

This number is released every year in the *International Bulletin for Missionary Research*.[2] In 2010 the number stood at 178,000, for 2009 176,000,[3] and for 2011 it was corrected to 100,000.[4] As it is an annually changing number, people think it is the number of martyrs of the given year, but actually it is said to be the average number per year of the last full decade (eg 1990-2000, 2000-2010).

The commentary provided with the "Global Status of Mission" itself indicates that this number is the most quoted figure from this table.[5] A number of this magnitude is widespread through the books *World Christian Encyclopedia, World Christian Trends*, *Atlas of Global Christianity* and the electronic *World Christian Database*.

I find it difficult to criticize this number on account of its widespread use, particularly due to the fact that it comes from reputable researchers and good friends. However, as an academic I have too often had to answer for such numbers before

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[2] www.internationalbulletin.org.

[3] "Status of Global Mission, 2011", see http://ockenga.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity/resources.php.

[4] "Status of Global Mission, 2011." International Bulletin of Missionary Research 35 (1011) 1: 29, line 28; cf. Commentary "Christianity 2011: Martyrs and the Resurgence of Religion." Ibid., p. 28.

[5] Ibid., p. 28.