



PARLIAMENT of AUSTRALIA

MEDIA RELEASE

HUMAN RIGHTS SUB-COMMITTEE

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE

Inquiry into the status of the human right to freedom of religion or belief

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PROTECTING FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The Human Rights Sub-Committee of the Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade has commenced an inquiry into the protection and promotion of the human right to freedom of religion or belief worldwide, including in Australia.

'This inquiry will examine the status of the fundamental human right to freedom of religion or belief in Australia, other nations of the Indo-Pacific region and across the globe,' Human Rights Sub-Committee Chair, the Hon Kevin Andrews MP, said.

'The Foreign Affairs Minister's action in referring this important topic to the Committee is most timely as the right to freedom of religion or belief, which is enshrined in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is being gravely violated in many parts of the world.'

This is not the first time that the Committee has examined these issues. In 1999, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, asked the Committee to inquire into Australia's efforts to promote and protect freedom of religion and belief. The Committee's report, *Conviction with Compassion*, was presented in 2000.

Since that time, much has changed in the world. Discrimination against and oppression of religious minorities appears to have become more prevalent in a number of countries. Religiously motivated acts of violence have also become an international and a domestic security issue. The United States' State Department's latest *International Religious Freedom Report*, presented to the Congress in August 2016, highlights:

... a continuing trend of some governments enforcing strict laws against blasphemy, apostasy, and conversion from the majority religion, or restricting religious liberty under the guise of combatting violent extremism. Many non-state actors, including terrorists, continued their assault on religious and ethnic minorities.

The **terms of reference** for the Committee's inquiry are as follows:

The Committee shall examine the status of the freedom of religion or belief (as recognised in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) around the world, including in Australia. The Committee shall have particular regard to:

- 1. The enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief globally, the nature and extent of violations and abuses of this right and the causes of those violations or abuses;*

2. *Action taken by governments, international organisations, national human rights institutions, and non-government organisations to protect the freedom of religion or belief, promote religious tolerance, and prevent violations or abuses of this right;*
3. *The relationship between the freedom of religion or belief and other human rights, and the implications of constraints on the freedom of religion or belief for the enjoyment of other universal human rights;*
4. *Australian efforts, including those of Federal, State and Territory governments and non-government organisations, to protect and promote the freedom of religion or belief in Australia and around the world, including in the Indo-Pacific region.*

The inquiry should have regard to developments since the Committee last reported on Australia's efforts to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief in November 2000.

The Human Rights Sub-Committee invites submissions from anyone with an interest in the issues raised by these terms of reference. Submissions addressing the terms of reference should be lodged by **10 February 2017**. Further details about the inquiry, including how to contribute, can be obtained from the Committee's web site, www.aph.gov.au/jfadt, or by contacting the Committee Secretariat.

Mr Andrews said the inquiry would commence with an examination of freedom of religion or belief in Australia, before examining developments in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

'It is appropriate that we first look at Australia's circumstances,' Mr Andrews said.

'Australia is fortunate to be one of the most free societies in the world; a country where citizens enjoy religious tolerance and where the right of individuals to practice the religion of their choice is respected and protected. Australians can also be justly proud that our country has not experienced the atrocious violations of this human right that have occurred elsewhere. Nevertheless, important questions touching on the right to freedom of religion or belief, and its relationship with other rights, have arisen in our own country in recent times.'

'How we protect the freedom of religion or belief, promote religious tolerance, and prevent violations or abuses of this right may prove to be of significance to the wider, religiously diverse world,' Mr Andrews said.

[Track this inquiry](#)

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For background:

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