

April 14, 2014

Dear Representative,

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals who are religious leaders, human rights advocates and practitioners to urge you to support the Freedom of Faith Act, a bill to permanently authorize the Special Immigrant Non-Minister provision in the Religious Worker Visa Program.

As Americans debate immigration reform, this coalition firmly believes in the importance of adopting legislation that is in the best interest of our diverse religious communities. Because the constitutional guarantee of religious liberty is empty without access to trained clergy and religious workers, this program is vital to American religious life.

Religious Worker Visa Program

The Special Immigrant Non-Minister provision in the Religious Worker Visa Program, which was enacted by Congress in 1990, permits religious groups to sponsor immigrant workers to staff and manage American religious centers. These workers teach in religious schools, provide spiritual counsel, serve as ritual specialists, design and build religious institutions, and perform numerous other religious functions. For many communities that do not have the facilities to train religious workers in the United States, the Non-Minister provision is essential to ensure that temples and religious centers are operational. Many other communities are unable to meet the demand for trained religious workers by hiring those trained in the United States and rely upon the program to adequately staff their respective religious centers.

Unfortunately, the current requirement that the Special Immigrant Non-Minister provision “sunset” every three years adds significant insecurity and instability. Not only is the requirement inefficient, creating unnecessary government bureaucracy, but it leaves this important program vulnerable to lapsing. This vulnerability prevents religious centers from making long-term staffing and management decisions and impairs community access to their houses of worship. The Special Immigrant Non-Minister provision is once again set to expire in 2015, absent specific legislation to reauthorize it. Given this program’s importance, it is essential that it does not sunset.

Removing the “Sunset” Requirement

The Freedom of Faith Act is a common sense solution to ensure that religious communities are able to adequately maintain their houses of worship. Given the religious worker visa program’s critical importance to many religious communities and the ongoing survival of several religious institutions, we urge you to support the removal of the “sunset” requirement by co-sponsoring the Freedom of Faith Act. To learn more about the Freedom of Faith Act, please contact Monica

Pham, Congressman Mike Honda's office, at (202) 225-2631 or monica.pham@mail.house.gov.

Respectfully,

ORGANIZATIONS

HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION

AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA

AMERICAN GUDWARA PARBANDHAK COMMITTEE

AMERICANS FOR DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS IN BAHRAIN

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE (AJC)

COALITION OF HINDU TEMPLES OF NORTH AMERICA (CHTNA)

COUNCIL ON AMERICAN-ISLAMIC RELATIONS (CAIR)

CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY NATIONAL AFFAIRS OFFICE

HIAS

HINDU MANDIR EXECUTIVES CONFERENCE (HMEC)

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS (ISKCON)

ISLAMIC INFORMATION CENTER

JUBILEE CAMPAIGN USA

MUSLIM PUBLIC AFFAIRS COUNCIL

THE PATRICK MCCOLLUM FOUNDATION

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AUTONOMOUS CHURCH OF AMERICA

SHIA RIGHTS WATCH

UNION OF COUNCILS FOR JEWS IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION (UCSJ)

UNITED HINDU AND JAIN TEMPLES (UHJT)

UNITED SIKHS

UNIVERSAL MUSLIM ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

VOICES FOR FREEDOM

Individuals

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