

February 27, 2012

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious leaders, human rights advocates and practitioners to urge you to appoint a new Commissioner to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) who will view freedom of religion, thought, conscience and belief as far more than a church-state issue, a social challenge or a security concern that simply needs to be reported on and managed. It is a multidisciplinary issue that cuts across human rights, economics, security, counter-terrorism, media, academia, business, and other sectors. USCIRF, and its Commissioners, should reflect this broad and interrelated awareness.

Only in bringing together a diversity of voices that are willing to listen and consider all viewpoints will the Commission expand the appeal and relevance of religious freedom in the U.S. and worldwide. Toward that end, the new Commission should continue to diligently report on violators of religious freedom and work cooperatively with the NGO community and other stakeholders to find new and innovative ways to promote the inherent dignity of every human, as proclaimed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And it should continue to expand its coordination with the International Religious Freedom Office at the State Department to engage every sector of society and government in the practical promotion of religious freedom.

The International Religious Freedom Act states, “members of the Commission shall be selected among distinguished individuals noted for their knowledge and experience in fields relevant to the issue of international religious freedom, including foreign affairs, direct experience abroad, human rights, and international law.” In addition, we urge you to appoint a new Commissioner consistent with the following characteristics, experience and background.

Characteristics – a USCIRF Commissioner should:

1. Be an advocate for freedom of religion, thought, conscience and belief, and for the practice and contribution of all faiths (or none).
2. Represent a diverse spectrum of identities including faith, vocation, age, gender, ethnicity, and regional diversity.
3. Have an equal focus on global promotion of religious freedom and on highlighting abuses by publicly calling for change.
4. Possess a willingness to investigate and engage in all countries where religious freedom violations occur, including democracies.
5. Engage on issues, people, places and governments proactively before situations become dire.
6. Possess a willingness to coordinate with the State Department, the NGO community, multi-faith coalitions, and domestic diaspora populations on country-specific issues.

Experience and Background – a USCIRF Commissioner should have an understanding of and/or experience with:

1. The Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights, in particular the First Amendment’s guarantee of the free exercise of religion.
2. International standards on freedom of religion, thought, conscience and belief.
3. The original articulation of the IRF Act and the history of its passage and implementation.

4. The mission and function of USCIRF.
5. U.S. foreign policy, to include the nexus between religious freedom and national security.
6. The developmental history of human rights, including the history of the various international instruments, the principles that underpin them, and the international institutions that exist to carry out the requirements of these instruments.
7. Relevant actors – domestic and international, NGO and government – essential to the promotion of religious freedom.

As a result, we trust that the Commission can help the United States government institutionalize religious freedom as an essential element of U.S. foreign policy and national security, integrating it into the promotion of democracy as well as the fight against religious-based extremism and violence.

Respectfully,

ORGANIZATIONS

AMERICAN CENTER FOR LAW & JUSTICE

AMERICAN ISLAMIC CONGRESS

CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY

HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION

HUMAN FRIENDS ORGANIZATION INTERNATIONAL

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW FOUNDATION

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ASSOCIATION

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA COSCIOUSNESS (ISKCON)

JUBILEE CAMPAIGN

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