
**Weekly Report of
Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme**

Religious Conflicts and Controversies

1. Pakistan rally ends after assurance over blasphemy law

Hundreds of protesters, mostly from the Sunni Tehreek group, staged a sit-in that paralysed Islamabad for almost four days. After gathering assurances from the government that it had no plans to amend the blasphemy laws, the rallying finally ended on Wednesday (29 March). The demonstrators demanded strict Islamic law and the hanging of the Christian woman who was accused of blasphemy.

Keywords: Pakistan, Blasphemy law, Demonstration, Sunni Tehreek group

2. Alexandria court bans demolition of churches in Egypt

The Administrative Court of Alexandria has blocked the demolition of a church belonging to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, in the process issuing a ruling that prohibits the demolition of any church in Egypt. The ruling has been praised by members of the Coptic Christian community in Egypt, viewing it as a landmark case to protect churches from harm. Although some still emphasised that the damage done to the historic building is “unforgivable” and urged the government to take more quick and effective measures.

Keywords: Egypt, Church, Coptic Orthodox Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians

3. Major Victory for Iranian Christians

The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights unanimously decided that a European country cannot send an asylum-seeker back to Iran without evaluating the risks he faces in Iran given his conversion to Christianity. The Chamber reheard the case after the 5th Section of the Court ruled it in favour of Sweden government in 2014. The decision was regarded as a timely one given the influx of Muslim migrants and the likelihood of more converts to Christianity in this context.

Keywords: Europe, Sweden, European Court of Human Rights, Muslim converts

4. French minister shocks with Muslim veil-slavery comment

Laurence Rossignol, French Minister for Women's Rights, compared Muslim women who wear the veil to American "Negroes" who accepted slavery during a TV programme interview to discuss the Islamic fashion industry. The comment has sparked accusations of racism across social media as a petition was also launched calling for her resignation. The minister later recognised the misuse of the word Negro, but stopped short of retracting the remark.

Keywords: France, Women's rights, Veil, Slavery

Secularism, Religious Freedom and New Religious Movements

1. Bishops ask government to reconsider closing religious freedom office

The Canadian Ambassador for Religious Freedom and the Office of Religious Freedom, which was launched by the former Canadian Conservative government in 2013, was scheduled to be closed down by the incumbent Liberal government by the end of March. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has asked the federal government to "reconsider" its decision to close the Office of Religious Freedom. Besides, the decision has also brought about opposing voices from the academia.

Keywords: Canada, Office of Religious Freedom, Catholic bishops

2. Proposed changes to laws on religions in Bulgaria spark ire

Two draft bills were tabled in Bulgaria's Parliament by oppositions to amend the law on religious denominations, with critics condemning the bills as an assault on religious freedom. The bills seek for tighter state control over religious groups and expand the power of the religious affairs directorate at the Cabinet office in the backdrop of the alleged new circumstances, including the influx of "foreign religions" and the preaching of radical Islam etc.

Keywords: Bulgaria, Bills, Religious activity

Peace, Reconciliation and Interfaith Dialogue

1. Atheists deserve a place in interfaith dialogue

With the conduct of the inaugural dialogue between the religious and the atheists in Singapore, as well as the publishing of The Straits Times' report on "Youth in Singapore Shunning Religion", light has been shed on incorporating the community of atheists into the interfaith efforts in Singapore. Scholars called for efforts to find a common ground and bridge the gulf between religion and atheism through dialogue, and to create a truly inclusive society where every voice is valued, regardless of faith.

Keywords: Singapore, Interfaith Dialogue

Contributors: Akanksha Narain, Ha Yu Xin, Yang Ni
Editors: Akanksha Narain