The persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion

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The European Parliament adopted by 496 to 28, with 113 abstentions, a resolution on the persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion.

Members are concerned about the high levels of coercion, discrimination, harassment, violence and repression suffered by people belonging to religious or belief minorities. This global phenomenon is intensifying in some regions and affects many religious communities, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Jews, as well as groups of people who are atheists, humanists, agnostics or who do not identify with any belief or religion.

Parliament affirmed its determination to **promote and protect the rights of persons belonging to minorities of religion or belief throughout the world**, including their right to adopt, change their religion or belief, or to choose, manifest, practice or abandon their religion or belief, in accordance with the principles of equality and non-discrimination. They strongly condemned all forms of persecution, violence and incitement to violence and acts of terrorism directed against any minority based on religion or belief.

Members also denounced the fact that a considerable number of individuals and civil society organisations are persecuted for peacefully questioning, criticising or caricaturing religious beliefs. These persistent violations of their freedom of thought and expression occur even within the Member States of the European Union.

The resolution stressed that states have the primary responsibility to promote and protect the human rights of persons belonging to religious or belief minorities, while protecting them against violations of these rights, in particular crimes against humanity and genocide. Churches, faith-based organisations and other institutions of belief and religion, as well as religious associations, play an important role in the social fabric of developing countries.

Addressing the main challenges posed by the persecution of religious minorities

Parliament stressed that it is crucial that those responsible for human rights violations against persons belonging to religious minorities or beliefs are held accountable for their actions. Furthermore, it is essential to thoroughly investigate human rights violations, to ensure that victims and their families have effective access to justice and remedies, and to provide adequate remedies.

The EU and its Member States should:

- work urgently with the relevant UN mechanisms and commissions to intensify their investigations into human rights violations against religious or belief minorities worldwide;

- increase their political support for the **International Criminal Court** and to engage in the fight against impunity in this context through the ratification of the Rome Statute;

- establish mechanisms that would enable them to detect early signs and risk factors of international crimes, with a view to preventing acts of violence based on belief or religion, in particular international crimes, such as genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes;

- apply **sanctions** against persons and entities responsible for serious or systematic abuse or violation of freedom of religion or belief;

- recognise the rights, beliefs and values of **indigenous peoples**, and commit to eliminating specific discrimination against indigenous peoples based on their beliefs, in a comprehensive manner through the Union's external action.

Members are deeply concerned about the misuse and instrumentalisation of belief or religion to impose discriminatory policies, laws, including criminal laws, or restrictions that contradict and undermine the **rights of LGBTIQ persons**, **women and girls** and limit their access to basic services, such as education and health, including sexual and reproductive rights, criminalise abortion in all contexts and adultery or facilitate religious practices contrary to human rights.

Parliament deplored the fact that in more than 70 countries around the world, authorities enforce criminal laws or seek to introduce new legislation that provide for punishments for **blasphemy**, heresy, apostasy, defamation of or insults against religions, and conversion, including the death sentence. They called on the EU to intensify its political dialogue with all countries concerned with a view to repealing these laws.

The Commission is invited to closely monitor the use of security, public order, counter-terrorism and anti-extremism legislation as an instrument to persecute or penalise persons belonging to religious or belief minorities.

The resolution stressed the importance of initiatives that build on **education and intercultural, interfaith and interreligious dialogues** in order to combat persecution, intolerance and hate speech against minorities based on belief or religion. It also called on governments to combat the phenomenon of **online and offline hate speech**, which continues to target religious or belief-based minorities.

Strengthening EU human rights foreign policy and external actions

Members called on the Council, the Commission, the EEAS and EU Member States to address persecutions on the grounds of belief or religion a **priority of the EU's human rights foreign policy**. This issue should be systematically raised in human rights dialogues with partner countries and in the relevant UN human rights fora.

The Commission and the EEAS are invited to:

- closely examine the human rights situation of religious minorities in third countries and the implementation of related commitments made in the framework of bilateral agreements between these countries and the EU;

- ensure **adequate funding** for issues related to the protection of persons belonging to religious minorities or beliefs, under the thematic programme on human rights of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe.

Lastly, Members recommended **strengthening the EU's multilateral commitment** to promoting respect for religious minorities or minorities of belief and mainstreaming this principle into human rights policies worldwide.