

No Women's Rights without Religious Freedom

The German government is neglecting religious women

Richard Ottinger

Religious freedom is increasingly under pressure worldwide. Muslim and Christian women and men in Asia are subjected to violent attacks, while atheists are persecuted in many Islamic countries and indigenous religious communities suffer from intimidation in Latin America. Women and girls are particularly affected by these human rights violations. A particularly gruesome example is Maira Shahbaz, who was abducted, tortured, and raped at the age of 14 in Pakistan. With video recordings of the acts, she was forced to give up her faith and to convert. Maira and her family were able to flee and have been in hiding ever since.

Various NGOs, such as the aid organisation Open Doors or the papal foundation Aid to the Church, have long reported on the abduction, sexual exploitation, and forced conversion of women under death threats. Despite this alarming situation, the problem does not seem to have reached the German government yet. This is even more worrying as the government calls for value-driven and feminist foreign policy. While such a policy is outlined in the recently published ten guidelines by the Foreign Office, the issue of religious freedom is not mentioned. Is this important human right in danger of falling into political oblivion in Germany?

Religious freedom in Germany: political disinterest and misguided assumptions?

The worldwide fight for religious freedom is receiving less and less political attention in Germany. This is due to two developments: First, the fight for religious freedom has a cross-party personnel problem. For generations Y and Z, the topic is not a matter of the heart. For them, climate and justice issues are at the forefront. At the same time, more and more people who are committed to the human right of religious freedom are leaving active politics. Volker Kauder and Herbert Hirte ended their parliamentary work in 2021. Stefan Ruppert of the FDP left in 2020 and Volker Beck of the Greens in 2017. In the SPD and Left Party, religious policy has long been considered an exotic subject.

Second, the current German government's interest in religious issues is exceptionally low. In particular, the Federal Foreign Minister repeatedly emphasises wanting to "anchor the gender perspective in people's minds" (Annalena Baerbock). However, the German government seems to be mistaken in assuming that feminism is an essentially secular project, and that emancipation and religion are fundamentally incompatible. This apparently ideologically motivated disregard for religion could explain why growing attacks on women's religious freedom are consistently overlooked by the government and why no

substantial commitment to religious freedom is visible in their political work (see also Iran). Although the office of the Commissioner of the Federal Government for Worldwide Religious and Worldview Freedom has been newly filled, it is not provided with adequate personnel or corresponding budget.

Cross-cutting issue of value-based policy

In terms of value-based policy, there are three areas of action that need to be addressed to strengthen religious freedom: First, allies of the coming generations in the cause of religious freedom must be won through targeted online and offline campaigns. These efforts to attract young people must emphasise the connection between religious freedom and the gender and climate justice issues already popular among younger generations.

Secondly, the commitment to religious freedom requires a different institutional weighting, beginning with personnel and financial upgrading and

retention of the office of the Federal Government Commissioner for Global Freedom of Religion and World View beyond legislative periods. The success of this work depends crucially on regular travel to crisis areas and the establishment and maintenance of networks. As observed at the last “International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief”, coalitions between civil society and political actors in the fight for global religious freedom provide hope. Germany should finally commit to these initiatives.

Thirdly, religious freedom must be understood and institutionally reflected as a cross-cutting issue, as attacks against the human right of religious freedom are increasingly affecting women’s rights and other human rights.

The German government should take the opportunity to act in the spirit of “Feminist Foreign Policy” and consider the intersecting connections between women’s rights and religious freedom when it comes to human rights. At the beginning of this rethinking process, there must be an understanding that women’s rights cannot exist without religious freedom.

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