News



A woman is pictured in a file photo praying during Mass at Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Abuja, Nigeria. A new report from Pew Research Center shows that social hostilities related to religion rose sharply in several countries during 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Afolabi Sotunde)

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A new report shows more countries saw spikes in religious hostility by individuals and groups in 2023, the last year for which data is available — with the rise attributable in part to harassment of religious minorities and the ongoing impact of the Israel-Hamas war.

At the same time, more governments have been cracking down on religious belief and expression since 2007.

The findings were released June 15 by Pew Research Center in its 16th annual report on global religious restriction levels.

Pew researchers Samirah Majumdar and Vivian Jacobs assessed data from 198 countries and territories — representing "all but a tiny fraction of the global population" — drawn from 19 key sources, including countries' constitutions, the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, the European Union, the FBI, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Data was then scored according to two metrics — a Government Restrictions Index, which tracked officially imposed religious restrictions; and a Social Hostilities Index, which measured acts perpetrated by individuals, groups and organizations, such as vandalism and physical attacks.

Pew noted that its summary statistics were not intended to determine which particular religious group experienced the most religious persecution, since even a single incident of harassment in a given country was counted.

Currently, there is no internationally accepted definition of religious persecution, which can take a variety of forms.

According to Pew, 55 of the 198 countries studied had "elevated (high or very high) levels of social hostilities involving religion in 2023," up from 45 in the year prior.

At the same time, Ethiopia and the Philippines saw a drop in religiously based social hostilities that same year, moving from Pew's high to moderate category for that index.

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Belgium, Norway, Russia, Spain and Sweden all moved into Pew's "high" category for the social hostilities index in 2023, along with Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand and Turkey.

Individual and group harassment of Muslims, Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses drove up Spain's score for the index in 2023, said Pew.

Norway also saw "repeated attacks" against Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as an "increase in hate speech" against Jews and Muslims following Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel and the subsequent Israel-Hamas war, Pew said.

Mob violence in Russia against both Jews and Muslims helped to drive up that nation's 2023 score in Pew's social hostilities index. In one incident, "multiple Russian women attacked a hijab-wearing Muslim woman and her children in a playground" on the edge of Moscow, an incident in which "the attackers allegedly set their dogs on the family and assaulted them," said Pew.

The research firm said that in 2023, "government harassment of religious groups (either verbal or physical) was one of the most common types of restrictions on religion," continuing a pattern in recent years.

Pew said that such harassment "occurred in 185 countries," or 98% of the total countries studied, in 2023, almost matching the previous year's number of 186.

In addition, said Pew, interference with religious worship "was a very common type of government restriction," seen in 175 (88%) of the 198 countries and territories it examined — "marking a new peak for the study."

Among the world's 25 largest nations, Pew found that those with the highest levels of government restrictions on religion were China, Iran, Indonesia, Egypt and Russia.

Among the same group of nations, "South Africa, the United States, Japan, the Philippines and the United Kingdom had the lowest levels" of government

restrictions on religion, said Pew.

Importantly, Pew clarified that North Korea was not included in the study, although "the sources clearly indicate that North Korea’s government is among the most repressive in the world with respect to religion as well as other civil and political liberties."

Pew explained that "North Korean society is effectively closed to outsiders," and that "independent observers lack regular access to the country," making data collection from that nation untenable.

Among the 25 most populous nations, "Nigeria, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Egypt had the highest levels of social hostilities involving religion," said Pew, noting that except for Egypt, those countries scored "very high" on that index.

In contrast, said Pew, "China, the U.S., South Africa, Japan and Vietnam" had "the lowest social hostilities scores" among the 25 most populous countries in 2023.

Pew noted that over the years it has conducted the study, the median score for government restrictions "has gone up fairly steadily," while the media for the social hostilities index has "fluctuated."

That trend, said the research center, "suggests that governments have been clamping down on religious beliefs and practices in more ways than they were in 2007," while "the number of countries with social hostilities has tended to rise and fall with events."