

✓ Religion

MEMORANDUM

TO: BRUCE REED, ELENA KAGAN

FROM: TOM FREEDMAN, MARY L. SMITH

RE: BILL ON RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

DATE: SEPTEMBER 15, 1997

SUMMARY

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA) have co-sponsored legislation to create a White House Office for the reporting of religious persecution worldwide and for imposing sanctions on foreign governments that engage in religious persecution. The office would also work to improve procedures for granting asylum for victims of religious persecution. There are more than 100 co-sponsors. Hearings were held the week of September 8. The Administration has opposed it. This bipartisan bill is included as a top priority on the Christian Coalition's domestic agenda. It is expected to go to the House floor in mid-October.

THE LEGISLATION'S MAIN POINTS

- Creates a new Office of Religious Persecution Monitoring in the White House. The director, subordinate only to the President, would be charged with reporting on abuses against religious minorities.
- Serious abuses would trigger automatic economic sanctions.
- The bill would have the director examine first and foremost the treatment of Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and Bahais, but then the office could begin to examine persecution of other faiths.
- Shuts off foreign aid (except humanitarian aid) to those countries that are either directly involved in, or take no action against, religious persecution within its borders.
- The bill would provide those fleeing religious persecution with special treatment from U.S. asylum officers. Specifically, the bill would expedite refugee and asylum procedures into the United States for people seeking to flee religious persecution.
- Denies visas to people linked to acts of persecution.

PROS

- Bill may serve as a vehicle to express displeasure with China.
- Bill may serve as a vehicle to force more attention to human-rights matters in general.
- Bill may provide a defense of the Christian groups that support it.
- The bill will elevate the role of human rights in U.S. foreign policy.

CONS

- Restricts flexibility on foreign-policy matters.
- Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights John Shattuck testified before the House International Relations Committee that the bill could result in “reprisals by repressive governments against victims, as well as an end to any dialogue on religious freedoms, in retaliation for the sanctions .”
- A separate White House office removed from the State Department and the National Security Council could end up marginalizing the issue rather than elevating it.
- The priority system in the bill, by naming some persecuted groups while neglecting others, could send a message that certain groups are valued more.
- Singling out the freedom to worship risks sending a message that some human rights are more cherished than others. For instance, political, rather than religious, dissidents such as Wei Jingshing are important to Americans, but are not accounted for in the bill.
- The narrowly drawn sanctions contained in this bill would actually provide “less rather than more protection than existing human rights law,” according to a letter signed by the heads of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and a handful of other organizations.
- Runs the risk of harming bilateral relations with key allies.
- Creates a confusing bureaucratic structure for dealing with religious persecution.
- Establishes a de facto hierarchy of human rights violations that could severely damage U.S. efforts.

EFFORTS TO HELP PASSAGE OF THE BILL

- Churches throughout the country are conducting a grass-roots campaign to publicize the persecution of religious minorities abroad. The passage of the Wolf-Specter bill and the campaigning from the churches are geared to coincide with a national day of prayer for the persecuted on November 16.
- On September 10, Jerry Lipson, spokesman for the International Relations Committee, stated that the bill was on a “fast track” and that Congress wants “it out of here by the end of the session.”