

Nations at risk: Fertile ground for persecution

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

It's the world's least desirable club: the league of failed and failing states. Every year, the Fund for Peace presents its list of the world's shakiest political entities. Qualifications for entry into the club include such factors as demographic crisis, economic decline and bloody intergroup conflict. A failed state is one that loses control of large parts of its territory and fails to provide rudimentary public services. State agencies become in effect criminal organizations, allied with gangs and terrorist factions in bloody battles over state property and natural resources. Gradually, the accumulation of disasters leads to the utter collapse of state authority and its replacement by private militias or warlords. Last year, unsurprisingly, Somalia led the pack of quasi-states and nonstates.

Understanding the process of state disintegration is vital for anyone who cares about religion and the fate of fellow believers. Failed states are the troubled home of some of the world's largest populations of both Christians and Muslims, and the concentration of both faiths in dysfunctional and violent countries will grow apace in the coming decades. Billions of people will have to cope with settings utterly lacking in the fundamental protections and services that Euro-Americans take for granted.

African nations lead the way in state failure, with 11 of the top 20 cases in last year's listing. Six more are in east and south Asia, two in the Middle East, and just one—Haiti—in the Western Hemisphere. The fact that most of the candidates cluster in the tropics will matter immensely if climate change develops as predicted. This is the area most likely to be hit by global warming, with all that implies for spreading desertification and decreased access to water and food.

Of course, the problems facing these countries could improve, or perhaps the states will fragment into new political entities, and at least some of those could become stable and prosperous. But for the sake of argument let us assume that the world's present political map will keep roughly its present shape through the mid-century.

Because these countries continue to have the highest birth rates on the planet, their populations will make up an increasing share of the human race by mid-century, and will represent a major component of global migration. And largely because of these demographics, the failed and failing states will also be critical element of the world's religious geography. By 2050, some 600 million Muslims—around a quarter of the world's total—will live in just three of these countries, namely Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria.

The picture for Christians is almost as bleak. Of the nations that should by 2050 have the world's largest Christian communities, four are high on the "alert" list regarding current or imminent state failure. Taken together, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo could by that point have around 450 million Christians, almost as many as in the whole of Europe.

State collapse will be a central theme in the development of global religion. It will be a factor driving interfaith conflict. Failed states offer fertile environments for religious persecution: desperate people turn against minorities, while private armies offer the means to kill or expel large numbers. Sudan usually features high in catalogues of political failure.

A failed state also has a huge impact on everyday religious experience and practice. Of necessity, religious organizations have to take over most of the responsibilities and activities that a Westerner might expect to fall to government. Churches and mosques supply social services and, in many instances, take over legal and justice functions as well, providing arbitration of disputes and performing community policing. It is scarcely surprising that Islamic courts thrive in Somalia, Sudan and parts of Pakistan where secular justice is only a vague rumor.

Among both Christians and Muslims, many dream, however fancifully, of full-fledged religious states that could suppress the anarchy and misery. Religious fundamentalism will not diminish until those societies develop strong states that can guarantee the supply of food, water, electricity and sanitation.

Only when we in the global North witness what happens when the state is taken out of the picture do we realize how much of what we regard as natural and inevitable in our religious traditions depends on the continued strength of political order and security.