

Embattled religious freedom envoy the new 'iron lady'

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The Obama administration's embattled nominee for religious freedom ambassador is comparing herself to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as she tries for a second time to land the post.

"They called Margaret Thatcher the 'iron lady,'" the Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook said Tuesday (April 5) in an address to a dinner of religious liberty advocates. "Change the name. It's mine now."

Cook was nominated for the post last June but her nomination stalled and expired in December. President Obama renominated her in February after critics complained the longtime vacancy reflected a low priority for the issue.

Critics, including some on Capitol Hill, have questioned whether the retired New York City pastor lacks enough direct experience to help guide policy on an issue that's at the heart of numerous international conflicts.

"This will go down in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest nomination," she said. "But we thank God to just be in the number."

Cook was introduced by the legislative affairs director of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, who said attendees hope she will be the next ambassador. As she did at her recent Senate confirmation hearings, Cook recounted her international travels and work after 9/11 as a New York police chaplain.

The Baptist minister known as "Dr. Sujay" retired in 2009 as pastor of a Bronx, N.Y., church she founded in 1996.

In her address to some 200 ambassadors, lawmakers and church leaders, Cook mentioned recent examples of religious turmoil, including the "arrogant" assassins who killed Pakistan's Christian minister for religious minorities. She called a Florida church's recent burning of a Quran -- which led to deadly riots in Afghanistan -- a "despicable act."

Without singling out any country by name, Cook said governments often give lip service to religious freedom while also taking steps to limit it. "Laws are too often broken by their own governments," she said, "and their people suffer."

Cook said U.S. diplomacy on religious freedom should involve not just forging relations with government officials but working with religious leaders abroad who can help influence political leaders.

"The front lines demand strategic action, not emotional nor reactionary tactics, but strategic, prayerful action," Cook said. "Either we deal with it now or fundamental extremists can fill the power vacuums where regions have lacked democratic institutions."