

Senate confirms Cook for religious freedom post

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue

A New York minister will soon fill the Obama administration's long-vacant position to oversee international issues of religious freedom. The Senate voted April 14 to confirm Suzan Johnson Cook for the post.

The vote, coming after a lengthy and controversial nomination process, positions Cook to become the first female and the first African American in the post.

"I am . . . persuaded in my mind, heart, and soul that religious freedom is the birthright of all people everywhere; a foundation of civil society, a key to international security, and it must always be a pillar of U.S. foreign policy," she said in a statement.

Cook was nominated last June, but her nomination stalled in the Senate and expired in December. Despite concerns that she might not have enough diplomatic experience, Cook was renominated in February and appeared at a second nomination hearing in late March.

The Baptist minister known as "Dr. Sujay" retired in 2009 as pastor of Bronx Christian Fellowship Church, which she founded in 1996. She was the first woman elected to lead the prominent Hampton University Minister's Conference of black clergy.

During hearings, she cited her travels and interfaith work on five continents and her experience as a New York police chaplain as qualifications for the ambassadorial post.

The independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom welcomed Cook as the third ambassador to oversee international religious liberty. "We look forward to meeting her and working jointly toward our mutual goal of advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair.

At

Cook's second hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Jim DeMint (R., S.C.) cited unspecified "indications" that Cook lacked qualifications for the job. "I am concerned about a person in this position having the passion, the courage and the boldness to deal with this issue," he said at the time. Other committee members, meanwhile, praised Cook for her "wonderful résumé" and called her "a strong advocate and not a shrinking violet."

In March, concerned about the position's lengthy vacancy, a coalition of religious freedom advocates urged greater attention to the religious roots of global conflict, especially the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East and violence directed against religious minorities.

"At present, both American diplomats and foreign governments are justified in concluding that neither the position nor the policy is a high priority for the United States," they wrote in a letter to leaders of the Senate committee.

Cook herself said at an April 5 dinner of religious liberty advocates in Washington: "This will go down in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the longest nomination. But we thank God to just be in the number." —RNS