

Religious freedom panel wins 11th-hour reprieve

by [Josef Kuhn](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

With a last-minute vote in mid-December, Congress saved an independent religious freedom watchdog commission that was about to shut down.

The bill reauthorizing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) for a three-year period was held up in the Senate for almost three months before passing with an amendment on December 13. The House approved it December 16, the same day the commission was set to close.

"I'm very pleased to see that the Congress has reauthorized the commission, and we can get back into the business of doing what we do best, which is monitoring conditions for religious freedom around the world," said USCIRF chairman Leonard Leo.

USCIRF is a bipartisan commission that issues an annual report of "countries of particular concern" on religious rights abuses and provides foreign policy recommendations to the president, Congress and the State Department. It has nine commissioners, a staff of 17 and a \$4 million annual budget.

Senate majority whip Richard Durbin (D., Ill.), who had reportedly held the bill as leverage in a dispute over federal funding for a prison in his state, proposed several tweaks to the reauthorization bill.

Durbin's amendment will limit the appointment of USCIRF's commissioners to a maximum of two two-year terms. The term of any current commissioner who has served at least two

full terms will expire 90 days after the legislation is enacted.

The

amendment also authorizes USCIRF employees who have filed a discrimination complaint against the commission to complete the proceedings.

This last measure may be a nod to a former agency policy analyst, Safiya Ghori-Ahmad, who filed a complaint against USCIRF with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in fall 2009. She charged that her contract was canceled because of her Muslim faith and her affiliation with the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

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issued a statement December 30 saying that the term-limits provisions should bring some "fresh faces" into the commission. "The commission has--wrongly or rightly--been accused of being ineffective because of their emphasis on condemning religious persecution rather than focusing on promoting religious freedom," said the statement from the Muslim group's Washington office.)

Rep. Frank Wolf (R., Va.), who helped establish USCIRF in 1998 and who wrote the reauthorization bill, said: "Today's reauthorization sends a clear message to repressive regimes around the globe that international religious freedom is a U.S. foreign policy priority." -RNS