

Persecution abroad

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What should the U.S. do when Christians are targeted for death in Sudan or persecuted in Pakistan--or when a Buddhist monk is tortured for his faith in Tibet? It shouldn't carry on business as usual with that country. But what exactly should it do? How can the U.S. effectively protect religious believers and advance the cause of religious freedom abroad?

Over the past year that question has stirred a debate in Congress and among church groups, and the debate has in the end produced a good piece of legislation--the International Religious Freedom Act, which passed the Senate on October 9 and was expected to win approval in the House of Representatives and at the White House before Congress left town for the fall recess. The bill, sponsored by Senators Don Nickles (R., Okla.) and Joseph Lieberman (D., Conn.), calls for a new "ambassador at large" for religious liberty who will make an annual report to Congress on countries engaged in religious persecution, and it requires the president to take action against the offending countries.

The Nickles-Lieberman bill is a much-improved version of the bill that overwhelmingly passed the House last spring. The chief problem with the House bill, which was strongly backed by the Christian Coalition, is that it would have imposed mandatory economic sanctions on countries that violate religious freedom. The Nickles-Lieberman bill, on the other hand, allows the president to choose among a variety of options for responding to the offending countries, ranging from diplomatic protest to sanctions. It also directs the president to consult with churches and other nongovernmental organizations before imposing sanctions.

Such flexibility is crucial for effective diplomacy. As a tool of international negotiations, sanctions are an exceedingly blunt instrument. Negotiators need to wield a stick as well as offer a carrot, but they also need to be able to choose the size of the stick that is likely to be most effective with a particular country in light of its practical circumstances and a broad assessment of U.S. goals.

Flexibility is also crucial for offering genuine assistance to the believers in peril. In some circumstances, sanctions can endanger the very people they are meant to help. If, for example, the U.S. were to impose economic sanctions on Indonesia for the treatment of Christians there, it could exacerbate Christian-Muslim relations and lead to increased hostility toward Christians. If we are to take a principled stand for religious freedom, we should at least care about the concrete impact of that stand.

The debate on religious persecution generated some interesting political rifts and some peculiar political alliances. The Religious Right, in fighting for tough sanctions against offending countries, urged pro-business Republicans to put moral principles above economic interests. Meanwhile, in opposing mandatory sanctions, the National Council of Churches and other mainline churches, which often take a critical view of multinational corporations and the effects of international capitalism, joined forces with the pro-business lobby USA*Engage, which fights all restrictions on economic trade.

As usual, the details of law-making are messy. But in this case, the process helped serve the desired goal: to highlight religious persecution abroad and to prod the State Department to respond effectively.