

# DIGITAL **PERSECUTION**

THE NEW FRONTIER FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

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OPEN DOORS PARLIAMENTARY REPORT



# Foreword

As new technology transforms the world, the risk of human rights abuses from digital persecution is growing. Given the emerging threat, this report from Open Doors on the rise of such emerging persecution is timely. It highlights the ways in which technology is being weaponised against religious minority communities around the world, and it gives recommendations for how democratic governments may turn the tide.

I am struck by the urgent need for action that this report reveals. Without a prompt response by national governments, international institutions and companies alike, millions around the world will suffer – and continue to suffer. The haunting example of Xinjiang demonstrates the potential for the specialised automation of religious persecution. The Chinese Communist Party has turned an entire region into a laboratory in which to hone the most efficient means of technological oppression. The Uyghurs there have effectively become a marketing tool to sell these technologies all over the world: a beta test for a virtual police state.

This report demonstrates that without a clear and concerted response, Chinese surveillance technology will be exported across the world, advancing the cause of digital authoritarianism and censorship. Sadly, the danger does not stop with authoritarian states. Non-state actors, such as nationalist groups, will learn from such groups in India, who use new technologies to spread lies about, and demonise, religious minorities. Responding to these emerging threats by standing up to defeat these digital forces of authoritarianism could prove to be a defining moment for countries who value freedom and human rights. We have done it before and we must do it again now, confronting this expansion of the virtual police state wherever it arises.

In this context, the report highlights the uniquely vulnerable position of religious minorities, especially those who rely on community and verbal communication as a ground of faith. Such minority groups often have no means of protecting themselves from the Goliath of autocracy and, via surveillance, censorship and disinformation, consigns them to an Orwellian existence. It is my hope that those who read this report will grasp the seriousness of digital persecution as a threat to Freedom of Religion or Belief and will act upon its recommendations before it is too late.

**Sam Brownback**

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# Introduction

We live in a digital age and a networked world. The growth of internet access dwarfs all previous technological change. In 1995, around 16 million people had access.<sup>1</sup> In 2000, that number had grown to 361 million,<sup>2</sup> in 2010, it stood at 1.9 billion<sup>3</sup> and today the number is 5 billion.<sup>4</sup> On every metric, tech is the fastest growing industry in the world.<sup>5</sup>

While smartphones are a still more recent invention, almost 84% of the world's population own one.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, only 70-74% of the world's population have access to 'safely managed water'.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, social media has transformed how we relate to each other. Globally, 4.65 billion people access social media,<sup>8</sup> including 2.9 billion active Facebook users. Indeed, in some countries, "Facebook is the internet."<sup>9</sup>

## Surveillance, Censorship and Disinformation

Despite initial optimism on technological change, such developments can be a double-edged sword. Surveillance technology has advanced to include facial and even emotional recognition, and the gathering of mass biometric data on whole populations is now possible.<sup>10</sup> Online censorship of words, or whole texts, can be done automatically, and authoritarian governments are now shaping the very platforms we use to interact online. Meanwhile, social media is allowing violent persecutors to coordinate, and spread disinformation against their victims. These developments pose grave risks for vulnerable minorities around the world.

The growing potential for such human rights abuses is part of what Mark Galeotti terms 'the weaponisation of everything'. He notes that war – including the war of authoritarianism against minorities and dissent – is now waged through new proxies (e.g., corporations and new technology).<sup>11</sup> Given the ubiquity of emerging technology, combined with political instability, this new form of war particularly affects the developing world. As Louis Papa and Thaier Hayajneh argue:

*"Despite the technology giants' utopian prophecies, the sobering reality is that the internet will likely be used to oppress most of the world... Defeating digital persecution in the Global South today would save four billion people from serious hardship tomorrow."*<sup>12</sup>

Religious minorities are particularly vulnerable to being denied their rights, including through digital persecution. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights states:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*

<sup>1</sup> Number of Internet Users (2016) - Internet Live Stats <internetlivestats.com/internet-users>

<sup>2</sup> The incredible growth of the Internet since 2000 - Pingdom <pingdom.com/blog>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Internet users in the world 2022 | Statista <statista.com/statistics>

<sup>5</sup> Fastest Growing Industries in 2022 - Controllers Council <controllerscouncil.org>

<sup>6</sup> How Many People Have Smartphones Worldwide (May 2022) <bankmycell.com/blog>

<sup>7</sup> Access to drinking water - UNICEF DATA <data.unicef.org/topic>

<sup>8</sup> Internet users in the world 2022 | Statista <statista.com/statistics>

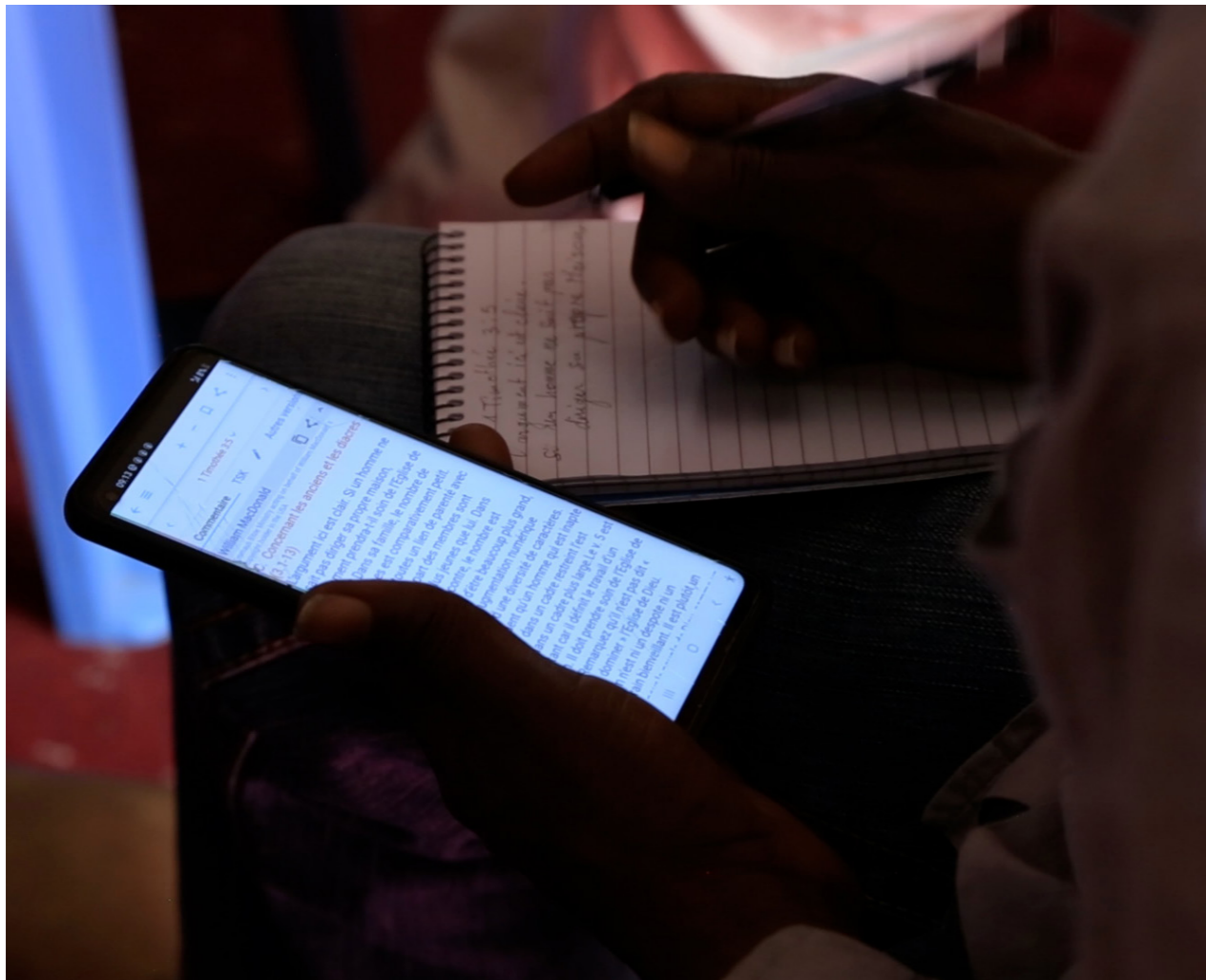
<sup>9</sup> Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar in English (ohchr.org) <ohchr.org/sites>

<sup>10</sup> One example of this is the Criminal Procedure (Identification) Bill being considered in India, which would give the state widespread access to biometric data. See: CPC: Criminal Procedure Identification Bill raises fears of surveillance in India - BBC News <bbc.co.uk/news>

<sup>11</sup> Mark Galeotti, *The Weaponisation of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War* (Yale University Press: 2022).

<sup>12</sup> See: 'A Survey of Defensive Measures for Digital Persecution in the Global South' by Louis Edward Papa and Thaier Hayajneh, *Fordham University*, MDPI, 29 September 2020: <www.mdpi.com/1999-5903/12/10/166>

Sadly, this right is denied in many countries, in which religious minorities are seen as a political threat. As a result, these minorities are monitored, silenced or even attacked for their faith or belief – and new technology is enabling old persecution.



**In Libya, for Muslims who convert to Christianity, accessing Christian resources and discussing faith online is extremely dangerous. Because of internet monitoring, converts can face violence from family or Islamist and tribal groups. Foreign Christians are more likely to experience harassment or be in danger of kidnapping for sharing their faith online. For both of these groups, there is the very real threat of arrest under blasphemy laws for sharing Christian materials online.**

This report covers the risks of digital persecution under three main headings: surveillance, censorship and disinformation. Emerging digital technology enhances state capacity for surveillance of religious minorities and censorship of their speech. It also greatly assists the spread of disinformation against religious minorities by state, and non-state, actors, which can have lethal consequences for those minorities. While distinguished here, these three forms of digital persecution often come together, as surveillance allows censorship, and censorship prevents these minorities from responding to disinformation against them.

For many years, Open Doors has been conducting research into the persecution of Christians around the world. Our research makes clear that persecution is not always state-driven but is often the work of non-state actors. Emerging technologies may give the state new opportunities to suppress dissent but may also provide ways for other groups to stay ahead of state authorities. This too may be problematic for religious minorities, as

these groups include extremists and criminals who, in some countries, pose an even greater threat to religious minorities than the state. Religious minorities may sometimes fear state inaction as much as state action.

Several of the case studies of digital persecution below come from China, which is ahead of many other countries in developing such technologies, and which has begun to export them to other countries with similar aims. China alone contains 54% of the world's CCTV cameras.<sup>13</sup> The leak of police files from Xinjiang in May 2022, evidence from which we have included in this report, is just one recent revelation of how far surveillance has advanced.

### What can be done?

The UK Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy of 2021 highlights that cyberspace will be increasingly contested. It notes that 'technology will create new vulnerabilities to hostile activity and attack in domains such as cyberspace and space, notably including the spread of disinformation online', with the use of data and surveillance technology being a challenge to individual rights. A struggle between 'digital freedom' and 'digital authoritarianism' is predicted.

In response, the Review states that the UK will 'be at the forefront of global regulation on technology, cyber, digital and data', noting that the cyber domain is 'subject to rapid technological change, and at an early stage of the evolution of its rules and norms'. It commits the UK to work with partners and multilateral institutions, developing new policy, regulatory and legal frameworks around digital technology, which ensure that human rights are respected. Given the risks to religious minorities, digital persecution must be considered in this context.

The UK has shown its growing commitment to Freedom of Religion or Belief, in launching the Truro Review into the Persecution of Christians, in supporting the work of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and in hosting the International Ministerial conference. However, the rise of digital persecution shows that addressing human rights abuses cannot be confined to one report or event but must continuously adapt to new challenges as they emerge – including those posed by rapid technological change.

This report concludes with recommendations for how these challenges may be met. Nationally, our recommendations focus on the UK Government, but similar policies could be implemented elsewhere. It will also be vital to forge international consensus on the use of emerging technology, which is now a global phenomenon. The second set of recommendations are therefore directed at the international community. Lastly, as government regulation will never be enough on its own to secure human rights compliance, the companies that develop new technology must themselves be persuaded to play their part. The final set of recommendations are therefore for corporations when their technology is implicated in human rights abuses.

Some of the emerging technologies described below are very new indeed, but are developing fast, and we can see the trajectory on which they lie. As there was with legislation around vehicles and the rules of the road – now barely a century old in the UK – there is time now to achieve consensus on such technology and establish regulation to protect individuals. Such an opportunity may not occur again.

**In October 2020, the Christian Council of China and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), owners of the online bookstore within WeChat, changed, replaced or just deleted the Chinese characters for 'Christ', 'Jesus' and 'Christian(s)' in their publications to comply with Chinese censorship laws. Even before these laws were introduced, TSPM did not publish audio or video from Protestant gatherings and seminars.**

<sup>13</sup> The Top 10 Most Surveilled Cities in the World | Cities | US News <usnews.com/news>

# Surveillance

Recent years have seen a rapid growth in surveillance technology. Options now exist for states to track their citizens with increasing sophistication. Surveillance may include:

- CCTV (including facial and emotional recognition);
- Device listening and spyware (e.g., ‘three-dimensional portrait and integrated data doors’, used by the Chinese authorities, which get information from people’s electronic devices);
- Monitoring of social networks or other online activity;
- Tracking, proximity and location apps (including those introduced under Covid-19); and
- Large-scale data harvesting.

Besides the long-standing ‘targeted’ surveillance of specific individuals, governments now have the option of undertaking ‘mass’ surveillance, where whole populations are tracked. Religious minorities under authoritarian regimes are often subject to both kinds of surveillance. State surveillance and data privacy are thus becoming key concerns across the world.

China is an early adopter of the more widespread surveillance technology and has 16 of the top 20 most surveilled cities in the world.<sup>14</sup> In 2015, a programme called ‘Sharp Eyes’ was launched with the goal to install a video surveillance network which achieves 100% nationwide coverage in public areas and in key industries. Smart monitoring is also increasingly accompanied by the ‘smart management’ of society – combining surveillance with systems by which individuals can be identified and intercepted, and whole groups monitored.

Unfortunately, there are now more than a hundred countries in what we can call the Chinese ‘techno-sphere’, according to an Open Technology Fund

report from 2019.<sup>15</sup> This means that these countries not only buy Chinese technology but may also have their officials trained in its use in China. As China exports its invasive technology, it is *de facto* exporting its ideology. In addition, Chinese technology does not come free. Even if there are no ‘back doors’ built in to enable spying, it is important to remember that using Chinese technology means that China sets the technical standards, which ultimately creates dependency.

Surveillance can also go hand in hand with censorship. First, it may prompt self-censorship, as targets of surveillance adapt to the assumption that they are being watched. After all, digital surveillance aims to achieve a panoptic effect, where the assumption of surveillance leads to changes in behaviour. Secondly, surveillance on technology platforms may lead to censorship on those platforms. For example, there are reports that online worship services in China have been shut down on Tencent Meeting (a video conferencing platform), due to the frequent mention of ‘Christ’. Thirdly, more systematically, surveillance may form part of a social credit system, as data on individuals is used to give each citizen a score.<sup>16</sup>



<sup>14</sup> Surveillance Camera Statistics: Which City has the Most CCTV Cameras? <comparitech.com/studies>

<sup>15</sup> OTF | Examining The Expanding Web of Chinese and Russian Information Controls <opentech.fund/news>

<sup>16</sup> One of the most well-known consequences of a low social credit score, which happens when a person fails to comply with a previous judgement, is being included on a blacklist maintained by the country’s Supreme People’s Court. In 2017, 6.15 million citizens were included on that list and had been barred from taking flights or booking train tickets on China’s high-speed train system.

## CASE STUDY

The following is based on a speech by Rahima Mahmut, of the World Uyghur Congress, given at the Digital Persecution Conference in March 2022.

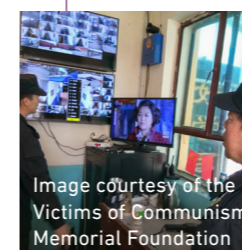
*After months with no contact, Rahima Mahmut picked up the telephone, excited to call her brother and find out what had been happening since they last spoke. He answered the phone cordially, but not with the traditional Islamic greeting. This surprised her, as her brother was a deeply religious man who had been trained from childhood in the traditional greetings. Rahima knew something was wrong. “Why does no one answer the phone to me?” she asked. Quietly, he responded: “They did the right thing. Leave us in God’s hands.” They have not spoken since.*

*Rahima’s brother is just one of the many Uyghurs living in fear in Xinjiang. What Rahima did not know at the time is that the traditional greeting is just one of the many ‘key-words’ that voice recognition software is programmed to detect. This software is built into the telecommunications infrastructure, as well as around the Xinjiang province. It can isolate and pick up voices from 300 metres away and translates them into Chinese. It is used in the streets, schools and even nurseries. This software is designed to pick up suspicious ‘key-words’, including: ‘pray’, ‘gather’, ‘together’, ‘Qur’an’ and ‘Mosque’. These words determine the threat-level assigned to an individual.*

*As well as voice recognition software, there are facial recognition cameras. Not only do these do what all facial recognition software does, but these cameras are also designed to determine emotional states. They pick up body temperature, muscular changes and micro-expressions in order to determine someone’s emotional state. And they too can be programmed, this time to be ‘ethnic-specific’. In other words, these cameras can be programmed to identify people on the basis of ethnicity, leading to reports of Uyghurs in mainland China being arrested and detained after a camera alerted the authorities to their background.*

*Furthermore, emotional recognition is used to interrogate suspects. Uyghurs are put into ‘tiger chairs’ that put strain on the muscles. This then causes the body temperature to raise slightly, the heart rate to increase and the muscles to tense, all of which is detected by the camera – this is then used as evidence to convict people on spurious charges. The data leak from Xinjiang in May 2022 hints at how these cameras might be used in a ‘re-education centre’. One document describes the monitoring of detainees during phone calls for ‘mood abnormalities’.*

*Data from voice recognition and emotional recognition software is combined with other data sources, including DNA harvesting, mobile and social media spyware and GPS tracking to create what Mahmut has described as the world’s first ‘digital genocide’. All these data points are fed into the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), an app which attaches a colour to an individual. As they pass through one of the many local checkpoints, if they are green, they go through unmolested. If they are yellow, the computer alerts authorities who question them before deciding what to do with them. If red, they are automatically arrested. Based on the inputted data, the algorithm makes these decisions. Just eating in a restaurant with a ‘red’ person can heighten your threat level.*



*In Xinjiang you are always watched; a computer decides your fate, against which there is no appeal. The Chinese authorities’ stated aim is to introduce ‘all-encompassing, round-the-clock, three-dimensional prevention and control... [and] resolutely ensure that there are no blind spots, no gaps, no blanks unfilled’. In the surveillance state of Xinjiang, they have achieved this; in Hong Kong, they are only beginning.*

# Censorship

As noted above, surveillance will go hand in hand with censorship; when surveillance technology becomes more sophisticated, so censorship can be more precise. States may also censor more effectively online than they could do offline.

Examples of digital censorship include:

- Online publication banning;
- Blocking websites, communications and posts (including state moderation and firewalls);<sup>17</sup>
- Punishing users who visit particular websites;
- Cancelling (activities, platforms and public personae – often without reason or redress); and
- Financial freezing.



For religious minorities, including Christians, censorship means not only a loss of freedom to speak about their faith, but also their ability to respond to disinformation (see below). It may also prevent them from accessing information, and lead to self-censorship.

Again, China is a major example of such practices, as the Chinese Government restricts online discussion of controversial topics. Increasingly it does this

through enforcing rules on platform design for digital companies operating in China (e.g., preventing comment sections on controversial topics). In addition, since the introduction of new laws in March 2022, it also requires people to have official permission before disseminating religious content online.

Many Central Asian governments follow the example of 'The Great Firewall of China', and block access to the internet or specific websites. For example, popular sites such as YouTube and Facebook and instant messaging apps like WhatsApp and Viber are blocked. It is also risky to use VPN services which are illegal in many parts of Central Asia.

We must also recognise that China's own censorship is not restricted to its own borders. Instead, China uses its influence on global tech companies. For example, Bible apps have been removed from online app stores in China – including from Google's Play Store and Apple's App Store – under pressure from the Chinese authorities. On the anniversary of the 1989 events at Tiananmen Square, Bing and YouTube produced error messages when searches were made for relevant photos or videos – this was later blamed on human error.

The Chinese Government has cracked down on the purchase of Christian materials online. One example is the raid of the Wheat Bookstore in Taizhou in 2019, which saw customers across China being interrogated and their houses searched years after they had bought Christian books online. As the unauthorised sale of Christian materials is illegal, store owner Chen Yu was sentenced to seven years in prison for operating an 'illegal business' in 2020. The sentence was upheld on appeal in January 2022.<sup>18</sup>

In time, censorship alters the views of the population. In China, the Chinese Communist Party is becoming increasingly successful at indoctrinating a young generation of internet and social media users simply by shutting out unfiltered news and feeding in ideological content, often with a strong nationalistic tone.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See: 'Chinese censorship is coming', by Jamie Bartlett, *Unherd*, 9 August 2021 <unherd.com/2021/08/chinese-censorship-comes-to-the-west/?=frlh>

<sup>18</sup> Christian Bookstore Owner, Chen Yu | Persecution <persecution.org/2022>

<sup>19</sup> Yaqiu Wang, 'In China, the "Great Firewall" is changing a generation,' *Politico*, 1 September 2020 <www.politico.com/news>

## CASE STUDY

Censorship is increasingly affecting all religious minorities around the world. Fareed Ahmad, of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in the UK, shares how this affects Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan.

*Ahmadi Muslims are severely persecuted in Pakistan. In 1974 the Pakistani Constitution was amended to declare Ahmadis as legally non-Muslim, with criminal penalties (e.g., imprisonment) subsequently added for Ahmadis who identify themselves as Muslim. Draconian anti-Ahmadi laws have subjected the Community to suppression and surveillance, as Ahmadi Muslims are listed as Ahmadi, rather than Muslim, in government databases, academic institutions and even on documents such as passports and voter lists.*

*These measures have been supplemented by a series of further laws and regulations that have resulted in dramatic censorship of Ahmadis in their public and private lives, such as preventing them from publishing their religious texts and periodicals. This contrasts with the extensive – uncensored – campaign of anti-Ahmadi hatred and disinformation that exists in Pakistan targeting Ahmadis, declaring them infidels and heretics who are deemed wajibul qatl (liable to be killed).*

*In the media and online world Ahmadis have fared no better. Regulatory measures were introduced in May 2020 by the broadcast regulator PEMRA to ban the broadcast of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community's television channel, MTA International.*

*Such action has been compounded by recent cyber laws, opening this new frontier of persecution. Amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA) empower the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) to block or remove online content if*

*"it considers [this] necessary in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan . . . public order, decency or morality" (Section 34 of PECA).*

*These laws have extraterritorial reach as they apply to*

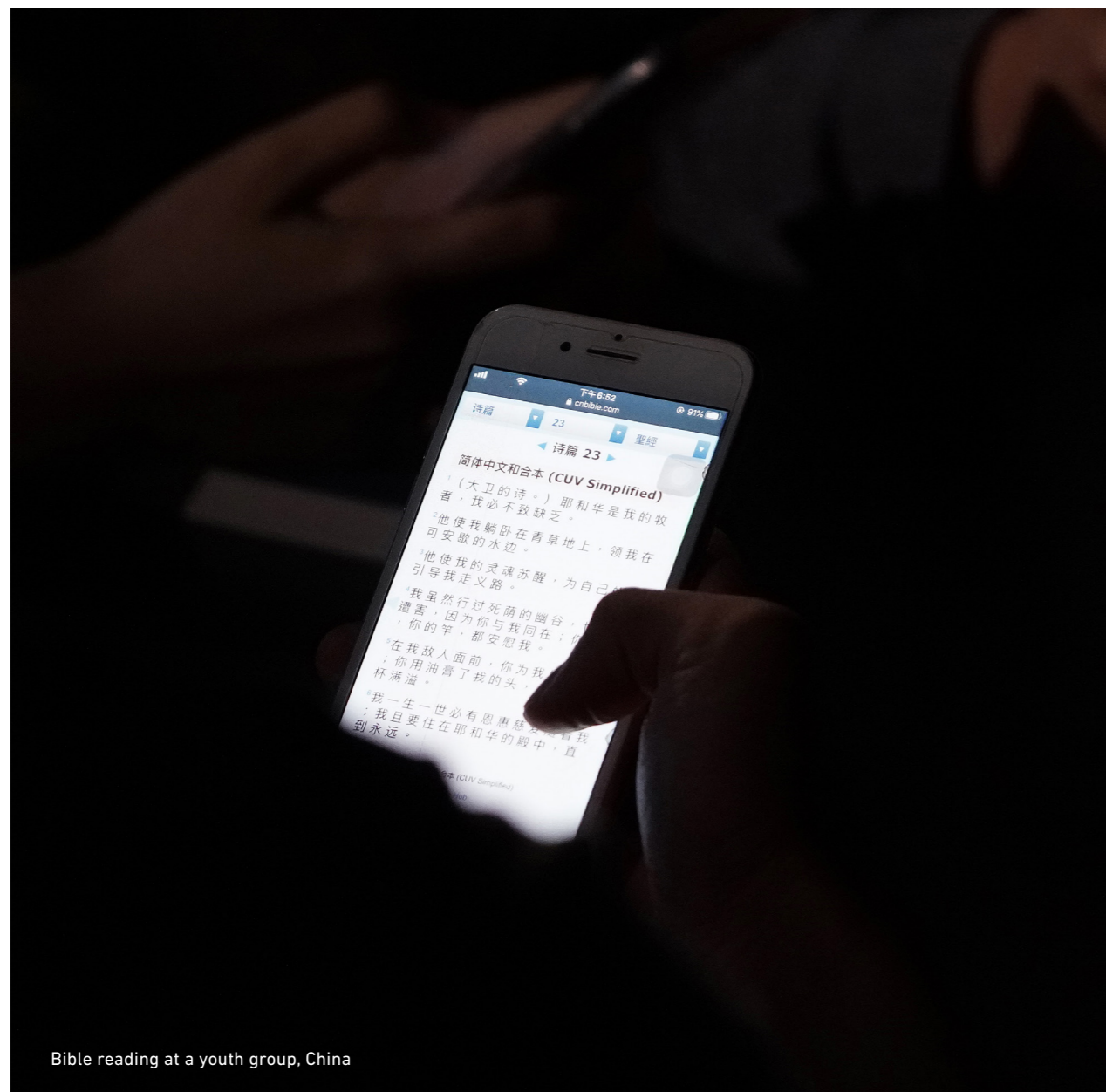
*"any act committed outside Pakistan by any person if the act constitutes an offence under [these laws] and affects a person, property, information system or data located in Pakistan" (Section 1(4)).*

*This enables the PTA, rather than a court, to determine if online material (whether inside or outside Pakistan) is blasphemous. It also empowers the PTA to order its removal. Ahmadis have been a prime target of these laws and have been arrested and charged under them. The Lahore Cyber-Crime wing of the Federal Investigation Agency has been particularly active in using these laws against Ahmadis.*

*Pakistan is also using the law to censor the social media, WhatsApp, and websites of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Pakistan. Over the past three years, 17 Ahmadis were named by police in their First Information Reports, and six were arrested for allegedly sharing material online (e.g., the Holy Quran). Even Islamic literature shared in private Ahmadi-only WhatsApp groups has been used as grounds to arrest and charge Ahmadis under PECA. In some cases, people have been falsely accused, had their phones taken by police, and have then been charged with fabricated cases of blasphemy under these laws. Currently six Ahmadis are in prison under these cyber laws.*

*The PTA has also used these laws to issue a series of notifications to Ahmadi websites and social media accounts outside Pakistan, to close down such accounts. It has also secured the removal of the*

Holy Quran app of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community from the Google app store in Pakistan. Persecution that is already rampant offline has now entered the digital sphere, resulting in Ahmadis facing extreme censorship and having nowhere to go to learn about their own faith. They cannot access their books or material in print, online or through social media channels. This is having a devastating impact on Ahmadi children in particular, depriving them of their fundamental human right to learn about their faith. Such censorship has also created grave new risks for Ahmadis of being arrested and imprisoned, targeted by law simply on grounds of faith.



Bible reading at a youth group, China

In China, Bible apps and Audible have been removed from Google's and Apple's app stores. Likewise, a popular Christian website 'Jona Home' has been shut down. Christians have sought other means of accessing Scripture online, but this has become increasingly difficult and dangerous. In 2019, the Wheat Christian Bookshop in Taizhou was raided by authorities. Chinese citizens who had made purchases online from the bookstore were then questioned by the authorities, even when purchases were made up to a decade earlier. The owner of this bookshop was sentenced to seven years in prison for operating an 'illegal business'.

## Disinformation

Disinformation is the communication of deliberately misleading or biased information, the manipulation of narrative or facts, and propaganda. It can be perpetrated by a state or assisted through state censorship that prevents the right of reply. However, disinformation can also come very easily from non-state actors, whose voices are amplified by online platforms. Examples of disinformation include:

- State, religious and commercial propaganda (including advertising);
- Targeted fake news;
- 'Discord bots' (strategically magnifying discord, including trolling algorithms); and
- Network incitement of mob violence.

Religious minorities are particularly vulnerable to disinformation, and the beliefs of minority communities (including Christians) may be misrepresented, and their communities demonised to instigate violence or legitimise oppression. While the rise of digital technology may allow non-state actors to avoid traditional state interference (e.g., through encryption), it also allows such bodies to

attack each other – and so may contribute to the persecution of religious minorities.

Many examples of disinformation against Christian and Muslim minorities in India can be seen in the report by researchers at the London School of Economics, commissioned by Open Doors, entitled *Destructive Lies*.<sup>20</sup> The report details the role played by social media misinformation and false accusation in motivating and publicising violence against Christian and Muslim minorities. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic, during which religious minorities in India were accused of complicity in spreading Covid-19.

There have been similar cases of online persecution in Myanmar. Disinformation was used to discredit or malign Christians and rouse people's anger against them. During the Covid-19 pandemic, stories of Christians (and other religious minorities) being the harbinger of the coronavirus could also be spread. Meanwhile, stories of Christians directly receiving foreign aid were also perpetuated, legitimising the view that they ought not to receive government aid. Following the military coup in Myanmar, the junta used such disinformation to fuel ethnic tensions and violence.

In 2018, a UN fact-finding mission report highlighted the significant role that social media, particularly Facebook, played in helping those who seek to spread hate in Myanmar, where 'Facebook is the internet'. The mission expressed dismay with how slow the social media giant has been to address the onslaught of hate speech posted on their network, as they refused even to provide country-specific data about the spread of hate speech on their platform.<sup>21</sup>

Religious minorities are beginning to seek legal redress against social media companies whose platforms may be used for dangerous misinformation. For example, Meta (Facebook) has been sued for failing to remove hateful content against the Rohingya in Myanmar.<sup>22</sup>



North Korean propaganda

<sup>20</sup> See: 'Destructive Lies: Disinformation, speech that incites violence and discrimination against religious minorities in India', Report commissioned by Open Doors and conducted by researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science, July 2021 <<https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/Destructive%20Lies-Executive-Summary.pdf>>

<sup>21</sup> Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar in English <[www.ohchr.org/sites/](http://www.ohchr.org/sites/)>

<sup>22</sup> Rohingya sue Facebook for £150bn over Myanmar genocide | Facebook | The Guardian <[theguardian.com/technology](http://theguardian.com/technology)>

## CASE STUDY

Sukumar was only a teenager when he was crushed and hacked to death. His alleged crime? Witchcraft. In 2020 several locals became ill and died due to contamination of the water. Local Hindutva activists, however, came to believe that these deaths were caused by Christian witchcraft. This had been circulated on social media, through Facebook and WhatsApp. In the middle of the night in the winter of 2020, Sukumar was abducted. After his dismembered corpse was discovered, the local news stations reported that Sukumar had, through witchcraft, caused the deaths of the villagers.<sup>23</sup> This is despite the fact that people continued to die after his body was discovered.

This is not the only falsehood disseminated about Christians and other religious minorities in India. The Hindu Nationalist group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), was founded in 1925 but has really garnered support since the rise of social media in India. RSS and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have become experts in shaping public discourse through the proliferation of disinformation. The most common accusations levelled against Christians are those of forced conversion and cattle slaughter.

Christians are painted as mercenary colonialists who take money in exchange for 'destroying Hindu culture'.<sup>24</sup> Through intimidation or bribery, it is alleged that these Christians are systematically degrading India's way of life by converting people away from Hinduism. This misrepresentation is propagated through social and traditional media. For example, a video of a routine prayer meeting may be circulated with the description, 'a secret meeting to convert Hindus into Christianity'.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the advent of encrypted messaging like WhatsApp has allowed false allegations of forced conversion to spread quickly. Local agitators use these falsehoods to stir up communal violence, like that directed towards Pastor Vipin<sup>26</sup>, who has now been attacked on numerous occasions by large gangs of young men, who have assaulted him and his 13-year-old daughter with impunity.



RSS flags hanging in a village street, India

<sup>23</sup> <media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/Destructive%20Lies-Full%20version-DIGITAL-ODUK-2021.pdf>, pp.32-34.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Name changed for security reasons.

Another frequent dishonesty about Christians, spread through social media, is that they kill cows as part of their faith. This misrepresentation of their religious beliefs is then used as grounds for violations of their human rights. One man, Ravi, was murdered by a 'Gau Rakshak' (cow protector) after he was allegedly involved in the sale of an ox. A mob of over 100 people accosted Ravi; other local Christian men were dragged out of their homes and beaten, and Christian women were sexually assaulted in the street as communal punishment for the alleged sale of this ox. The first Ravi's wife, Meera<sup>27</sup>, knew about her husband's assault was a video that she saw circulated on social media.<sup>28</sup>

This misrepresentation of wide-spread slaughter of cattle by Christians is also validated by local leaders; in one shocking video, an elected politician of the BJP is seen making a speech in which he encourages faithful Indians to protect mother cow by 'behead[ing] the heathens'.<sup>29</sup> The ability of extremist groups to use social and traditional media to shape public discourse and propagate falsehoods about those who do not fit in with their vision of India has resulted in wide-spread suspicion of religious minorities and cultivated a culture of violence.

Nobody has ever faced arrest for any of these incidents, and destructive disinformation about Christians and other minorities continues to be spread through new technologies unabated.



Surveillance cameras installed in a church, China

Christian leaders throughout China have been interrogated for participating in online faith seminars. Similar online meetings have faced interruption, disruption and disconnection while texts of messages presented by Christians have been taken down. In May 2022, the Presbyterian Church of Shanghai was the latest church to have its social media accounts disabled. Despite Covid-19 restrictions, the first church to be officially allowed to hold services online was a Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church in Jiangsu. The licence was not issued until March 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Name changed for security reasons.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pp. 23-26.

<sup>29</sup> <theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hindu-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks>

# Recommendations

## National

1. The rapid advance of digital technology, with all its implications for freedom of conscience, religion and speech, highlights the need for further research into this new human rights frontier. **The UK Government should, following the completion of the Truro review process this year, commit to undertake further research into this and other new challenges to freedom of religion or belief, using such research to drive religiously literate policy responses.**
2. The contributions at the Open Doors Digital Persecution Conference highlighted how digital technology may exacerbate human rights abuses. Companies will need to exercise due diligence in ensuring that their products are not put to such a use, and this requirement must be backed up by regulation. **The UK Government should adopt the recommendation of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, in its 2017 report, and 'bring forward legislation to impose a duty on all companies to prevent human rights abuses, as well as an offence of failure to prevent human rights abuses for all companies, including parent companies, along the lines of the relevant provisions of the Bribery Act 2010'. This will help to prevent British companies from becoming complicit in human rights abuses.**
3. In December 2020, the UN Secretary General stated that atrocity crimes are often preceded by early warning signs including 'hate speech'. Most hate speech and harmful disinformation is now conducted on social media. **The UK Government should extend its early warning analysis frameworks to include sections on social media analysis. Meanwhile, those who are working in the field of atrocity crime prevention should be trained in how early warning signs manifest on social media.**
4. In previous annual human rights reports, the FCDO described its support for a programme of

work to combat digital infringements of human rights. That multi-year programme was up for renewal. However, it appears that work on digital persecution has shrunk, and that digital persecution has disappeared from the latest FCDO human rights report. **The UK Government should reinstate funding to combat digital persecution. By not designating funds to combat digital persecution, the FCDO risks implying that they do not take this threat to FoRB seriously.**

## Multilateral

1. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and others have called for a moratorium on the export of surveillance technology, warning that it is 'highly dangerous and irresponsible to allow the surveillance technology and trade sector to operate as a human rights-free zone.'<sup>30</sup> **International institutions should, along with the UK Government, work to develop standards around surveillance technology that safeguard the rights of all (including religious minorities).**
2. To many people, social media is the internet. They are therefore exposed only to narratives designed to bolster and entrench what they already believe. In this echo chamber, it is easy to become radicalised. **International institutions should engage populations vulnerable to radicalisation on the universal scope of human rights. They should do so in their own language and on the media platforms that they use.**

## Corporate

1. Increasingly, technology companies are coming under pressure to censor their own products and services in line with the preferences of authoritarian governments, to the detriment of religious minorities. An example of this is the removal of Bible apps by Google and Apple.

**Companies involved in digital technology should determine to uphold human rights and civil liberties, resisting these demands from authoritarian regimes.**

2. Given the findings of our research on the plight of Christian and Muslim communities in India and elsewhere, the impact of social media disinformation on religious minorities can no longer be ignored. **Social media companies should take steps to counter disinformation on their platforms that result in real-world harm and violence against religious minorities. These companies should increase the number of content moderators and ensure that their moderators are religiously and culturally literate (e.g., understanding historical patterns of intercommunal violence and the role of narratives).**
3. Frequently, speech that seeks to incite violence against religious minorities is not dealt with in a

timely manner. Likewise, videos and images of violence against minorities designed to provoke further violence remain available on social media for extended periods of time, despite being reported. **Social media platforms should immediately remove all content that violates Article 20 of the ICCPR and ensure that they have the capacity to do so. Reported content should always be reviewed by a trained, human moderator.**

4. In many cases, the human rights situation in a country where a business operates may be problematic and may deteriorate rapidly. This will have significant implications for companies holding data on users which could exacerbate persecution. **These companies should pay particular attention to human rights due diligence requirements (see above) and should also consider what a responsible exit from a given country looks like if the human rights situation were to deteriorate.<sup>31</sup>**



<sup>30</sup> <ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27379&LangID=E>

<sup>31</sup> See: Responsible Exit from Russia: Business and Human Rights in a Global Governance Gap <biicl.org/blog> as well as a paper delivered by Dr Daniel Aguirre at the Open Doors Digital Persecution Conference (publication forthcoming), which discusses the case of Telenor in Myanmar.



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