

LAND

The interplay between the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and land takes place in a number of ways. For instance, FoRB could be invoked by a group to protect their right to a particular land. Some indigenous peoples assert that certain land has spiritual significance to them because of their religious belief that there is a relationship between the land and their ancestors. A conflict of land then arises when a government attempts to claim authority over the land. Other times, what first appears to be a problem of religious tensions can be traced back to disputes over land. A conflict over land may transform into religious conflict because the two opposing groups are from different religions. While its fundamental nature of the conflict remains land related, FoRB might become a factor when tensions start to increase between the two religious groups. Similarly, the persecution of religious minorities often begins with land grabs for commercial reasons. Through this thematic note on land, we also see how religious nationalism can often be a driver behind FoRB violations.

The religious significance of land

Some indigenous religious tradition assert a relationship between religious and other physical dimensions of existence. Land and sacred sites can therefore hold fundamental religious significance. In Australia, the centrality of land to the religious beliefs of Indigenous people forms the basis for calls for recognising and respecting such land as an essential part of Australia's efforts to protect FoRB. Protecting this land has been overlooked and undervalued by a legal framework based on Judaeo-Christian and Western values, which are often distinct from indigenous values. The religious significance of specific sites often has to be proved according to a framework that does not understand it. As a result, indigenous religious traditions are denied the same level of recognition, status and protection accorded to the majority of 'mainstream' religions, and Indigenous Australians have been dispossessed and alienated from their lands, which form a fundamental aspect of their worship and practice of religion and belief.

When conflict over land turns religious

Disputes over land often turns into a religious conflict over time. Describing such dispute solely as FoRB issues misses this development in their nature. While the presence of religious hostilities may become pronounced, a narrative that frames a conflict or issue as an inherently religious problem is likely to increase the more inflammatory aspects of the conflict.

The Fulani-Farmer conflict in Nigeria is an example of this tendency. The fact that this dispute has escalated from relatively minor clashes into full massacres between Muslims and Christians has been attributed to strong religious divides in central Nigeria. The killings have been viewed as motivated along religious and ethnic lines. But it would be a mistake to reduce the conflict to a simple clash of ethnicities or religions, instead of addressing the historic grievances concerning these land disputes. The use of essential resources, such as farmland, grazing areas and water, is considered the major source of the fighting. While Fulani herders travel hundreds of miles in large numbers with their cattle in search of pasturelands, they frequently clash with farmers who accuse them of damaging their crops and failing to control their animals. The Fulani herders, in turn, accuse the farmers of sending gangs to attack them and steal their cattle. The conflict has been further exasperated by the effect of climate change on grazing lands, which has pushed the Fulani herdsmen further south in search of grass and water. Thus it is important to analyse such conflicts by considering all the drivers related to land, rather than by using only the lens of a religious conflict.

Land grabs which affect religious minorities

Land-grabbing, usually committed by governments, is another dimension to FoRB when it affects religious minorities. While the reason for these land grabs are usually business interests or the value of the land, religious minorities are often most adversely affected due to a lack of political representation. Thus such minorities are especially vulnerable and are less able to access redress. While much of the coverage on the persecution of the Rohingya population in Myanmar has focused on the religious and ethnic dimension of this persecution, the forced displacement is also driven by other factors. For instance, the military has reportedly grabbed land from smallholders since the 1990s, and this project has increased in recent years. Thus the aim of appropriating lands has also driven the displacement.

Religious Nationalism

Another dimension to the relationship between land and religion can be seen in religious nationalism, which appears to be rising in a number of countries. Religious nationalism arises when religion is central, or is one of several features necessary, to national identity and to assertions about what it means to belong to a given nation. In this context, religious identity can become closely tied to land, and other religious identities are perceived as a threat to national identity. An example of this is Hindu nationalism. Hindu Nationalists believe that India is an inherently Hindu country, with no obligation to embrace other religions in the country. This ideology has been blamed for the mob violence that has spread across India, which has targeted Muslims in particular.