

FoRB and power

Freedom of Religion or Belief is an individual human right that is usually divided in two core elements, the *forum internum* and the *forum externum*. The first, the internal element, is non-negotiable and cannot be limited, not even in time of war. The *forum externum*, the public manifestation of your faith, alone or together with others, can only be limited to 'protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others' (article 18.3 ICCPR). The threshold for any restriction of the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief is high and reserved for exceptional circumstances. Limitations should be temporary, effective, proportionate, the least intrusive option, and prescribed by law.

Many countries have some sort of registration system for religion or belief communities. Registration may give access to certain privileges like tax exemption for donations, but formal registration can never be a condition for the free exercise of your Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Religions and belief systems include certain ideas and ideals of how societies should be organised and how people should relate to one another. These ideals might not converge with those of the rulers of the land. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion creates the space to express these views in a peaceful manner. It allows for a prophetic voice in society.

Freedom of Religion or Belief is an individual human right and authorities cannot compel any of its citizens to change his or her religion. Even though countries might have declared a state religion, it should treat all religions and beliefs equally.

Most Western countries adhere to a separation of church and state. Of course, this does not mean that these two entities inhabit two totally separate islands. It is the citizens that constitute a state that adhere to a religion or belief. But the state has no direct authority over the church, its structure, officials, or practises, and likewise the church cannot dictate decisions of the state. The implementation of this concept

however, can vary greatly e.g. from laïcité in France to the Church of England and anything in between.

In Old Testament times, rulers were held accountable by prophets. Inspired by God, they criticised those in authority if circumstances so demanded. Likewise, in New Testament times, it was the church that acted as a counterforce to authoritarian and ungodly rulers. The Church is called to provide a prophetic alternative to society and its leaders. It can only do so, however, when there is a healthy distance between religion and power. Too close a relationship between worldly authority and any religion or belief system seriously impacts the freedom of the people. Recent times show that this is not only true for theistic beliefs but also for non-theistic belief systems.

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion should be a leading principle for any ruler or government, regardless their personal convictions. When conflicts arise, it is up to the independent judiciary to settle the case, maximising human rights for all involved.