

Written evidence from Open Doors UK & Ireland (TFP0019)

Open Doors UK & Ireland is part of an international NGO network which has for 60 years supported and strengthened persecuted Christians. We now work in over 65 countries worldwide, in close consultation with church leaders and Christians who experience first-hand the reality of the denial of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Our aim is for freedom of religion to be understood as a fundamental human right, covering far more than just the right to worship privately in a building, and to be taken seriously in policy decisions. Every year at Open Doors, we collate in depth research to compile a World Watch List which ranks the countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution. In the 2021 Open Doors World Watch List¹ of facts and trends relating to the persecution of Christians globally, it was noted that technology is playing an increasingly apparent part in the worsening of globalised persecution against religious minorities. Persecution has become digital. Technology is already a very important and growing threat to human rights and civil liberties of religious minorities.

The content in this submission barely scratches the surface for how persecution is shaping its digital face. As technology continues to evolve, expand and converge, become more diverse and pervasive in all aspects of reach and influence, it will affect every sphere of Christian life and worship. While there are many benefits from such technological developments, it is clear that they are also engendering new and unprecedented threats and challenges.

Increasing Access

In Asia, the improvement of mobile infrastructure allows more people to gain access to the Internet. In its 2020 statistics, the *Internet World Stats* says that about half of the global internet users are found in Asia (50.9 percent), a 0.5 percentage increase from its June 2019 statistics.² China tops the Asia list with 37.1 percent of the total Asia users coming from this country, followed by India (24.3 percent). Among the countries with low mobile penetration are found in South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan.

There exists serious concern that while technology empowers citizenry, new surveillance technologies also give the powerful more power in ensuring its people stay in line. While technology has the power to democratise information, it also allows repressive governments to consolidate their power further.³

¹ https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?_ga=2.170273248.1540654841.1612895267-1578016928.1578049733

² de Argaez, E. (2020, July 23). *Internet Usage in Asia*. Retrieved from Internet World Stats: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>

³ Harari, Y. (2018, October). *Why Technology Favors Tyranny*. Retrieved from The Atlantic:

A Pew Research Centre study⁴ published in February found this was corroborated by the alarming themes in responses of many tech experts who said they are worried about the impact of technology on democracy. One of the themes is that technology will lead to an imbalance of power whereby individuals/groups/governments/corporations will seek to use technology to maintain or enhance their political dominance. It has also found that along with the rise of misinformation and disinformation, and digital illiteracy, those with authority over emerging technologies which have a mass/popular reach are able to engineer compliance by influencing opinions and perspectives in order to consolidate power.

With repressive governments doing everything in their powers to suppress those they deem threats to their regime; religious minorities are finding persecution is also becoming digital. Here in the UK, acknowledgement of this fast-developing context should become a primary consideration for trade and foreign policy, especially where technology is a means by which fundamental human rights are being abused.

Institutionalising Modern Suppression

In a testimony to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom virtual hearing, the deputy director of the Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technology Initiative, Chris Meserole, turned the spotlight on the Xi regime and Chinese Communist Party carrying out technological surveillance of religion in China with “unprecedented efficiency and scale”.⁵ China is cited as “home to 18 of the 20 most monitored cities in the world and over half of the surveillance cameras in use globally” by a study conducted by British technology website *Comparitech*. The rate by which surveillance cameras are installed in China is likewise growing every year. China will further enhance its surveillance capability by increasing the deployment of facial recognition-capable cameras. Severine Arsene, an assistant professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong says that these technologies might be used for a more sinister purpose—targeting of dissidents or even ethnic minorities.⁶

Covid19

The Covid-19 pandemic has also amplified suppression of human rights and religious freedom by authoritarian regimes. As Governments imposed lockdowns to curb the spread of the deadly virus, mass gatherings were banned. The *seemingly* temporary closures of places of worship were initially welcomed. Churches brought their worship online through broadcast streaming sites via or video conferencing apps. Even in pre-pandemic times however, the censorship of contents shared online has been steadily tightened across Asia.

https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/youval-noah-harari-technology-tyranny/568330/?utm_source=share&utm_campaign=share

⁴ Pew Research Center. (2020). *Many Tech Experts Say Digital Disruption Will Hurt Democracy*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved October 29, 2020, from https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2020/02/PI_2020.02.21_future-democracy_REPORT.pdf

⁵ Meserole, C. (2020, July 22). *Technology surveillance of religion in China*. Retrieved from Brookings: https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/technological-surveillance-of-religion-in-china/?utm_campaign=Brookings%20Brief&utm_medium=email&utm_content=92427584&utm_source=hs_email

⁶ Chik, H. (2020, July 27). *China is home to 18 of the 20 most surveilled cities in the world*. Retrieved from Inkstone: https://www.inkstonenews.com/society/china-home-18-20-most-surveilled-cities-world/article/3094805?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_content=article

China monitors all contents being released by all users online. This, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) says, is to maintain national security, social stability and avoid the spread of terrorism and extremism. While rules and regulations concerning cyber control do not explicitly include religious contents among the “improper contents” to be censored, these are heavily regulated. Anyone who wishes to do so must first secure permission from the Department of Religious Affairs at the provincial level prior to releasing them online. While monitoring is still porous—as Chinese Christians are still able to access religious contents online and, in the case of blocked sites, via VPN—the government are still monitoring either by physically checking smartphones (which happens in volatile regions such as Xinjiang), or by keyword-searching and then blocking it. The recent blocking of bible apps in China, and the closure of Christian chat group forums suggest that an intentional programme of digital persecution of Christians and other religious minorities is expanding in China.

A similar cyber control measure is being implemented by Bangladesh. In 2018, the Digital Security Act was passed. This law aims to criminalize acts done “within the digital space under the auspices of increasing digital security.”⁷ It makes blasphemy a non-bailable offense and increases the penalty for it. This law limits basic rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief.

In many Central Asian countries, governments block access of citizens to the Internet, especially in critical moments such as the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The same happens in Turkmenistan where popular sites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook* and instant messaging apps like *Whatsapp* and *Viber* are blocked. It is risky to use VPN services which are illegal in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, these sites are heavily monitored even by Russian intelligence operatives. The government also spies on the users’ contacts to check whether they are connected to foreign organizations, especially religious ones.⁸

In a bid to facilitate easy contact tracing, many governments required their citizens to install tracking apps on their mobile phones. Users are required to input their personal information on these apps. There is fear this could potentially be used for spying and mishandling of personal information.

In the Chinese contact tracing app, citizens are assigned a colour which determines their mobility options. Many criticisms against this say that it is targeted against marginalized groups.⁹ It was also found to send the user’s location, city name and identifying code to a server run by the police.¹⁰ Even when the pandemic has begun to die down, in some cities, the use of the app is still required, leading people to think that this may become a permanent part of their lives.¹¹

India’s contact tracing app, *Aarogya Setu*, was required by the government to be installed in all smartphones owned by government and private sector employees in India. Like China’s contact tracing app, data is also sent to government servers.

⁷ Akins, H. (2020). *USCIRF Country Update: Bangladesh*. Washington DC: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

⁸ Field information

⁹ Tangermann, V. (2020, April 16). *In China, This Coronavirus App Pretty Much Controls Your Life*. Retrieved from Futurism.com: <https://futurism.com/contact-tracing-apps-china-coronavirus>

¹⁰ Mozur, P., Zhong, R., & Krolik, A. (2020, March 1). *In Coronavirus Fight, China Gives Citizens a Color Code, With Red Flags*. Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/business/china-coronavirus-surveillance.html>

¹¹ Zhong, R. (2020, May 26). *China's Virus Apps May Outlast the Outbreak, Stirring Privacy Fears*. Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/technology/china-coronavirus-surveillance.html>

However, what is most alarming is the lack of transparency on the part of the several government agencies on who built this app, how it was proposed and approved for use, including the government departments involved in the process and the communication that took place with private persons who built this app.

With the Modi regimes and BJP's Hindu nationalistic ideology, our partners in India express fear that user data would "most probably fall in the hands of the IT cell of BJP, which is the largest in the country." This data may then be used by BJP websites to produce and spread false allegations against minorities, including Christians.

Impact for religious minorities

Monitoring and coercion through technology is the objective of persecutors (in most cases of online monitoring—the state): to exert or maintain control over the Church and Christians.

Another snare that are widespread all over the Internet is misinformation and black propaganda. As the State has almost absolute control over the contents that can be proliferated on the Internet, the State is able to manipulate users' opinion, emotion, and preference by spreading fake news and other forms of propaganda, targeting specific sectors. By and large, fake news against Christians is shared on social media by agents of persecution (mostly, hardliners of the majority/dominant religion). This is something we are seeing at large in India.¹²

A trending persecution approach

The Council on Foreign Relations notes that the global increase in violence against minorities is connected to online hate speeches. Trends show that hate crimes reflect the changes in the political climate and that social media can exacerbate this by "magnifying the discord." At the most extreme, CFR says, that "rumours and invectives disseminated online have contributed to violence ranging from lynching[s] to ethnic cleansing."¹³

Such is the world trend that tech experts are deeply concerned about. Emmanuel Edet, a legal adviser for the National Information Technology Development Agency in Nigeria, said, "The use of social media coupled with faceless artificial intelligence-driven opinions can manipulate popular opinion that will deny people the right to express their choice for fear of going against the crowd."¹⁴

We call on UK Government to consider this evidence when reviewing UK Foreign Policy.

- **Technology and digital persecution needs to be a consideration/factor in all our future trade and diplomatic relations going forward.**

¹² Thomas, S. (2020, September 14). *Dear Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook must stop promoting hate in India*. Retrieved from UCANews: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/dear-mark-zuckerberg-facebook-must-stop-promoting-hate-in-india/89505#>

¹³ Laub, Z. (2019, June 7). *Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons*. Retrieved from Council on Foreign Relations: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons>

¹⁴ Pew Research Center. (2020). *Many Tech Experts Say Digital Disruption Will Hurt Democracy*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved October 29, 2020, from https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2020/02/PI_2020.02.21_future-democracy_REPORT.pdf

- **The FCDO needs to engage with private companies to encourage internationally accepted standard practice for the use of social media and to maximize the benefits for diplomacy**
 - **We need to see an increase in the level of moderators for social media platforms in foreign countries**
 - **Introduction of sanctions where there is incited violence and discrimination from misinformation**

May 2021