

Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief
Held online, via Zoom
19th April 2022

Present

John Mason MSP
Mohammad Asif
Murdo Fraser MSP
Craig Horne
Isabel Smyth
Maureen Sier
Jamie Spurway
Gordon Matheson
Ali-Abbas Hussnain
Brian Miller
Oliver Lane
Yolanda Matro
Sita Kumari
Malcolm MacLeod
Chris Ringland
Sabah Aslam
M Adrees
Maureen Bell
Fiona Brodie

Apologies

Foysol Choudhury MSP
Katy Clark MSP
Jeremy Balfour MSP
Mercedes Villalba MSP
Maurice Golden MSP
Fraser Sutherland
James Fraser
Nigel Kenny
Edwina Proudfoot
Hassan Rabbani
Rt Hon Lord Wallace of Tankerness

Quorate

As John Mason MSP and Murdo Fraser MSP were both present, the meeting was quorate.

General Meeting

John Mason welcomed the attendants to the second meeting of the year. In his opening remarks he suggested the group could consider covering Russia as a topic in future meetings. John then invited comments or corrections from the minutes of the previous meeting from October 2021. The only comment made on the minutes was to agree 'Deputy Convenor' as the term for the role of Murdo Fraser. Murdo then approved the minutes and Maureen Sier seconded it.

John then introduced the evening's speaker, Mohammad Asif, Director of Afghan Human Rights Foundation and Founder of Scottish Afghan Society.

Presentation from Mohammad Asif

Mohammad Asif provided a passionate and expansive account of the state of religious freedom in Afghanistan. He began by commenting that freedom of religion or belief has been enshrined in the constitution of Afghanistan for many years, but that in recent years the constitution has not been followed. He described the vast majority of the population as being Sunni Muslim, with groups of Shia Muslims, as well as Sikhs and Hindus.

Much of the presentation focused on the violent persecution of these minority faith groups. The mujahideen restricted the faith of Shia Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs. The women of minority faiths were often the target of sexual assault. Young Sikh and Hindu women and girls would be taken from their homes and forcibly married. They believed that Islam allowed them to do this but Mohammad described that the true teachings of the faith forbid this. The mujahideen were in power until 1996 when the Taliban took over. During this period, Hindus and Sikhs were told to wear yellow clothes so that they could be identified. The yellow clothing was to allow other groups to identify and keep a distance from them. Before September 11th there were a few hundred thousand Hindus but after the persecution they received, the majority left Afghanistan. Similarly in the 1990s especially, Shia Muslims were murdered and persecuted just because they are not the same sect of Islam as the majority.

The blasphemy law in Afghanistan is very serious – the punishment is death. And similarly for homosexuality. This was not the case under the previous regime. Mohammad highlighted the case of a woman who was a victim of terrible mob violence following a false accusation of blasphemy, despite police and military observing.

For those who are Shia or ethnically Hazara or homosexual, there is great danger in Afghanistan now. There is no freedom of religion or belief in Afghanistan now. The freedom of movement is also very restricted today. There is very little dialogue between the groups. If you want to have a dialogue with the Taliban you have to declare your loyalty to their spiritual leader.

Mohammad commented that he blames the West for the abandonment of Afghanistan to the Taliban.

Women are often the major victims - especially those of a different faith. The so-called Islamic State issued a decree that if there is a widow in a home, then the occupants

should put a black flag on the building so that an ISIS soldier can come and take that woman to forcibly marry her. If there is an unmarried girl in the house, then you are expected to put a green flag so that they can do the same.

The government announced an amnesty that warlords who committed war crimes on the basis of faith or religion would not be prosecuted for it. This was the first announcement of the Karzai government.

Islam tells us to engage in dialogue. To have good relations with other religions. Islam promotes peace and dialogue. The Qu'ran orders you to sit down to agree your issues together, rather than fighting. There is a saying of the prophet asking us to bring people together rather than disagreeing. Sadly, in Afghanistan they use religion as a weapon. They use the extreme interpretation of Islam. More Afghans are killed because of religious differences than were killed by foreign bombings.

Next steps

In the discussion following the presentation, Maureen Sier welcomed Sita Kumari whose husband was a photographer in Afghanistan who captured the beauty of the country and its people. The suggestion was made that the Scottish Parliament could host the Faces of Kabul exhibition. The photographs serve to present the human story of Afghanistan.

There was also discussion about the need to support refugees from Afghanistan. Mohammad suggested that the West has passed responsibility for registering as a refugee to the UNHCR, but he considered that the UN is very corrupt. There was also discussion the current UK Home Office scheme, which is said to still be running, but Mohammad advised that in reality it is closed.