



The Tyranny of the Majority: Explaining Discrimination against Minority Religions

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Despite a consensus that religious minorities bear the brunt of religious discrimination from the state, many questions remain surrounding why and when this discrimination occurs, and formal tests using global collections are lacking. Building on religious economy theory and previous research on other civil liberties, we propose that minority religions face discrimination when they lack support from an independent judiciary, are viewed as a threat to the state, and represent unwanted competition for a state-supported religion. Using multi-level models on the recently collected Religion and State-Minorities dataset, which includes more than 500 minority religions in 174 countries, we find support for each of the propositions. The findings are especially striking for discrimination directed at minority religions' institutions and clergy.

Main Findings

Whereas support for civil liberties is often associated with open and free elections, we find that an independent judiciary offers minority members, institutions, and clergy greater protection from discrimination than free elections, regime durability, or

Did You Know?

- Overall, 73% of all national constitutions promise religious freedom, but 80% of the countries offering these promises have at least one law restricting religious freedoms, and 38% have four or more such laws.
- Religious freedoms are a strong predictor of reduced levels of religion-related violence.

Source: Finke (2013).

Related Articles

Finke, Roger, Dane R. Mataic, and Jonathan Fox. (Forthcoming). "Assessing the Impact of Religious Registration." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

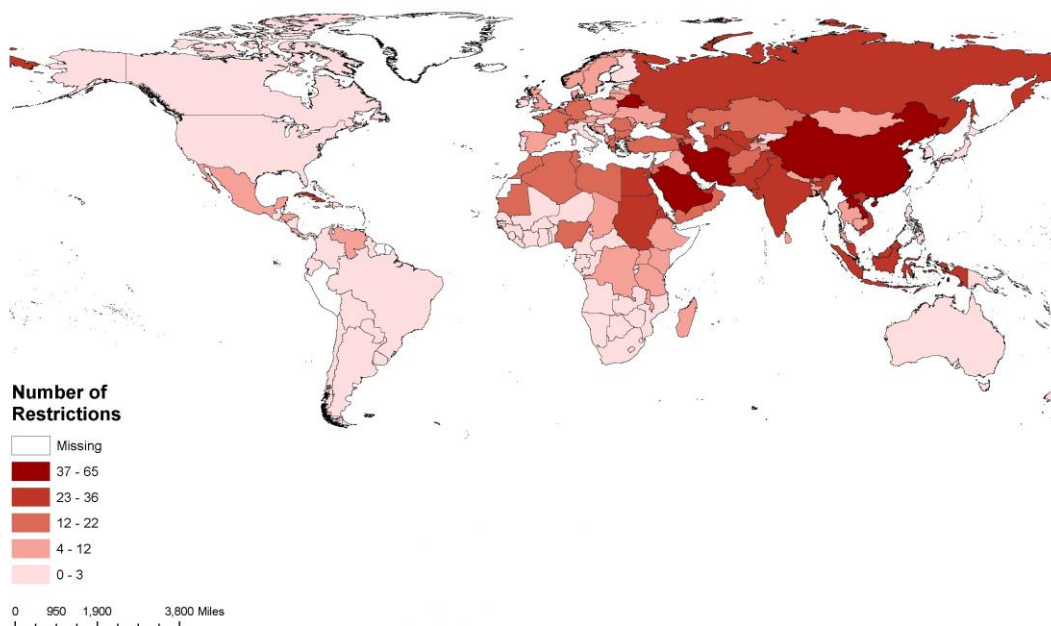
Finke, Roger, Robert R. Martin, and Jonathan Fox. (2017). "[Explaining Discrimination against Religious Minorities.](#)" *Politics and Religion* 10: 389–416.

Finke, Roger and Robert R. Martin. (2014). "[Ensuring Liberties: Understanding State Restrictions on Religious Freedoms.](#)" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53(4): 687–705.

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effective governments. Though judicial independence is a strong predictor of discrimination against religious minorities, free and fair elections hold weak and inconsistent relationships with discrimination and government effectiveness, and regime durability holds no perceivable relationship. These findings align with a growing body of research on other civil liberties and with extensive qualitative research on religious minorities (Richardson 2004; Hill and Jones 2014). Unable to sway public opinion or force legislative action, minorities rely on the courts for protection. In order to provide this protection, however, the courts must be free from outside interference by other branches of the government and other institutions, such as religion.

Restrictions of Minority Religions By Country, 2008



We also find that when states are highly supportive of a select religion or when they are supportive of an ideology in opposition to religion, they use their power to control and deter the actions of minority religions. Consistent with arguments from religious economy theory, our results suggest that when the state or the dominant religion favored by the state perceives religious minorities as a threat, discriminatory legislation and actions follow. We find that as state resources supporting a select religion increase, the level of discrimination against minority religions increases as well. Further, this research and other work suggest that when dominant religions hold the support of the state, they use this support to target religious competitors. Even when states have no bonds with a select religion, however, they may still perceive minority religions as a threat. In particular, we find that current and former communist states have significant levels of discrimination against religious minorities' institutions and clergy.

We conclude that because religious minorities represent unwanted competition for the dominant religion and can be perceived as a threat to the state and larger culture, they commonly face discrimination unless they receive protection from an independent judiciary.

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