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Majorities Reject Banning Defamation of Religion: 20 Nation Poll

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COLLEGE PARK, Md. – As the UN General Assembly prepares to debate a proposal calling for nations to take action against the defamation of religion, majorities in 13 of 20 nations polled around the world support the right to criticize a religion.

On average, across all countries polled, 57% of respondents agree that “people should be allowed to publicly criticize a religion because people should have freedom of speech.” However, an average of 34% of respondents agree that governments “should have the right to fine or imprison people who publicly criticize a religion because such criticism could defame the religion.”

The issue of whether freedom of speech should extend to discussions of religion has stirred considerable controversy in recent months. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), a group of 56 Muslim nations, is championing a proposed U.N. resolution that calls on all nations of the world “to effectively combat defamation of all religions and incitement to religious hatred in general and against Islam and Muslims in particular.”

Of the seven nations where most people agree with that criticism of religion should be prohibited five have overwhelmingly Muslim populations – Egypt (71%), Pakistan (62%), Iraq (57%), Indonesia (49%), and the Palestinian territories (51%). Another two – India (59%) and Nigeria (54%)-- have historically been plagued by sectarian violence.

The resolution was passed by the U.N. Human Rights Council in March and is expected to come before the General Assembly before the end of 2009. Similar resolutions have gained the rights panel’s approval since 1999 and have been passed by the General Assembly since 2005.

Human rights advocates and several Western governments, including the United States, oppose the resolution, saying it restricts freedom of expression and could be used to curb religious freedoms rather than protect them. This week, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the United States “will stand against discrimination and persecution. But an individual’s ability to practice his or her religion has no bearing on others’ freedom of speech. ... Differences should be met with tolerance, not with the suppression of discourse.”

Zamir Akram, a representative of the OIC, defended the resolution earlier this month, saying that the organization “attached great importance to the exercise of freedom of belief and expression, but the exercise of this right carried with it duties and responsibilities, including the need to fight against hate speech.”

WorldPublicOpinion.org conducted the poll of 18487 respondents in 20 nations. This includes many of the largest nations—India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia—as well as Mexico, Chile, Germany, Great Britain, France, Poland, Ukraine, Kenya, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, the Palestinian territories, and South Korea. Polling was also conducted in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The margins of error range from +/-3

to 4 percentage points. The surveys were conducted across the different nations between April 25 and July 9, 2009.

Support for the right to criticize religion is strongest in the United States, with 89%, compared to just 9% support for government restrictions. Chile is next with 82% support, followed by Mexico (81%), Britain (81%), Germany (76%), Poland (68%), Azerbaijan (67%), France (66%), Russia (61%), South Korea (59%), Turkey (54%), Kenya (54%), and Ukraine (53%). In addition, 68% of Taiwanese and 81% in Hong Kong agree the ability to criticize religion should be a right.

Though the strongest supporters of restrictions on criticism of religions are in Muslim countries a separate poll by WPO in 2008 showed that overwhelming majorities said it is at least somewhat important for people to have the right to express any opinion, including criticism of the government or religious leaders. This included Indonesia (94%), the Palestinian territories (94%), and Egypt (80%) -- Iraq and Pakistan were not included in the survey. In fact, clear majorities in every one of the 20 nations included in that poll took the same position, ranging from 69% in India to 98% in the United States.

However the 2008 poll also asked whether governments should have the right to prohibit certain political or religious views from being discussed, and Indonesia (55%) was one of only three countries where a majority answered in the affirmative. Kenya (67%) and Thailand (63%) did so as well. Egypt was evenly divided, 49% yes and 49% no, while more people in the remaining 16 countries said governments should not have such a right.

The two non-Muslim countries where majorities responded to the recent WPO poll by saying governments should be able to fine or imprison people for criticizing religions are India and Nigeria. Both were founded in the 20th century with borders that were drawn by former colonial powers in a way that encompassed a variety of religions, including a large Muslim minority. And both have since experienced periodic spates of sectarian violence that have frequently involved Muslims. This suggests that their support of government restrictions may stem not from a popular push to defend Islam -- Muslims make up roughly half of Nigeria's population but just 13% of India's -- but from a broadly shared desire to maintain order by curbing criticism of religions.

In Nigeria, that is borne out by the fact that Muslims and Christians respond almost identically to the poll question. Fifty-four percent of Christians and 53% of Muslims favor government restrictions, while 45% of Muslims and 43% of Christians say criticism of religion should be allowed.

