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**2019**

# **ChaIr REPORT**

## General Assembly 3: Special Political and Decolonization Committee (GA3: SPECPOL)

## Preventing countries from supporting religious cults (cults that are threatening secularism)

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**Introduction**

The 20th century, especially after the end of the world wars, exhibited an unprecedented global movement towards democracy and the formation of republics. This brought with it the rise to prevalence of a laissez-faire interpretation of secularism, across continents. However, with an upswing of right-wing movements in the 21st century, whether the religious aspects of some of these movements pose threats to the continuance of secularism began being discussed, and the implementation of the concept turned dubious even in nations which are secular by law. Global collaboration may come into play in the protection of such political ideals, especially when protected by law, to ensure the continuance of religious freedoms across the world.

### **Key Vocabulary**

Secularism: The collective notion of separation of “the church” and the state, equality and non-discrimination before the law against all religions, and the freedom to practice whatever religion one desires, without infringing the same freedom of others

Laȉcité: The French strain of secularism, which also inspired early republican Turkish interpretation of the concept, that is based on the constitutional non-recognition of any religious authority, prioritization of public order before religious freedom, and religious freedoms being granted with these constraints. Due to this second principle, whether the wearing of some Muslim headscarves should be allowed became an important point of dispute.

Religious Cult: A religious group, typically considered to be strange or otherwise unusual. In the context of this chair report, it may be taken as a particular religion.

**Focused Overview**

This section covers the typical development of the issue, while the section below, Major Parties Involved and Their Views, covers country-specific examples for the topic.

In many countries, as they formed republics after the overthrowing of local rulers, a popular revolution against the existent regime, a successful counter-colonial movement, or else, secularism was enshrined in their constitutions as they imported the principles of democracy from the West. In Western countries, this principle was established after long historical developments, often entailing people becoming wary of potential dangers of the governments controlling religion, their potential influence thereon, as well as not desiring the politicization of the church and their desire for religious leaders to not manipulate state powers (working both ways, in essence). However, other countries around the world did not have historical experiences or realizations like these in the West, which gave their people -even if the same could not be said about some of their leaders, who may be more aware of these reasons- little reason to believe in these principles, other than for some politicians’ statements that informed them of how essential this value was for the continuance of their republics. In some cases, especially with a majority religion existing, people began questioning why they would have to conform by secular principles if the majority believed in one religion, and voted in governments that were in-line with the religious principles, not noting that majority did not always constitute rightfulness in democracies. In other cases, authoritarian figures rose to power, using religion and their supposed “defense” of it as a justification for their holding of power. This is especially true in conservative populist movements, even if sometimes the religiousness of the leadership is left tacit and implicit.

In some countries, secularism was brought as a means of modernizing the society, with French secularism, laȉcité being adopted. This sometimes meant the outlawing of some religious practices, such as rules governing outfits, which increased the tension between the reformers and the religious portion of the population. In such cases, reactionary right-wing movements were often formed, with religious governments coming to power on platforms to “bring back religious freedoms” but often translating in action to the most-often-unofficial adoption of a religion’s principles by the government in policy-making, and sometimes to the oppression of minority religious groups.

In the West, although most countries do conform to the principle of secularism that they had once struggled to establish, some countries also began straying away from this general trend. With a trend towards more libertarian policies being observed in mainstream politics in the West in recent years, even within parties labeled “Conservative” or “Christian” in their names, reactionary right-wing movements began forming there, as well, defending more traditional and conservative values, which usually entail some degree of rooting in majority, traditional religions and their beliefs. While these parties have failed to become the government in most European countries, they have achieved a greater degree of success in the United States, where the party currently in power is a fervent defender of Christian values.

In the three generalized cases, some common trends are observed. The movements are typically caused by a lack of complete information on the nature and reasons for secularism, and oftentimes are parts of larger right-wing reactionary movements against some type of change in the countries. It must be noted that harsh implementations of secularism, such as radical French laȉcité, may sometimes be the roots of this issue. The movements against secularism are typically shaped by the majority religious groups in countries, indicating some degree of manipulation of democratic power.

**Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

India
From the times of its founding, India had a largely secular government, which even sought to abolish some religious traditions (such as Hinduism’s caste system) in the name of human rights, in a Hindu-majority country, which also has a great number of other religions with a significant number of adherents. However, under the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government, a distinctly Hindu ideology began shaping the state’s decisions, resulting in a multitude of religiously motivated restrictions and state policies, such as a ban on consuming beef in a few states. The Supreme Court of India has been crucial in preventing or overturning some of the more extreme cases, but they have not been entirely reliable in their adherence to the constitutional principle of secularism and it is not very likely for their current composition to last under a potential BJP rule for a few more terms.

### Turkey

### Before Turkey was founded, Islam played an important role in the lives of the Muslim denizens of the Ottoman Empire, as their religion was a source of power for the sultan, the source of the legal code, and the determiner of their status in society (though that was not a particularly respected one). With the declaration of the Republic of Turkey, the subsequent abolishment of the caliphate, and the secularization of the country, French laȉcité served as the basis of the changes, though a particularly radical house of it was adhered to. This caused a reactionary movement to form among the people, overthrowing the then-governing party and eventually clinching power initially under the ideology of providing economic and religious freedom equality, before shifting to a more Islamist message. The most recent government’s tendencies to prioritize religious spending, promoting Islamic values and societal image, and passing laws to bring the society in-line with Islamic standards have raised concerns with regards to the undermining of secularism.

### United States of America (USA)

### USA has been historically a strongly secular state, with the many churches being separated from the state, due to a reactionary movement to the libertarian policies employed by the Democratic Party in recent times, Republican Party has taken a more Christian conservative stance socially, which has resulted in various measures and government policies, with regards to abortion and LGBTQ rights, that align with Christian values more than they do with liberal ones. Yet still, it may be argued that these measures were taken for different reasons, though it must be noted how Vice-President Pence repeatedly placed his Christian status high up among his three principal values when talking on the campaign trail for the 2016 presidential election.

### Israel

### While Israel is an officially secular country, their past has been marked with many instances of crimes against Muslims being ignored by law enforcement and the judiciary, public officials discriminating against Muslims, and a state policy of military targeting of Muslim militants, creating serious polarization among the citizens. To make matters worse, the Netanyahu government has been marked by a swing to the religious right, with the state intensifying the Jewish identity, redoubling on the anti-militant action, increasing the polarization, and embracing a Judaist public image, hurting the claim of non-discrimination by the state.

### Indonesia

### Indonesia, like many countries in Southeast Asia, has an officially secular government. However, it has suffered in recent years of an upsurge of Islamic movement, which threaten core values of the government. For example, the controversy following the election of a Christian mayor to a major city and the emergence of him poking fun at the Qur’an in the past resulted in demands for this man to stand down, indicative of the anti-secular mindset of some citizens (there is a near-consensus on the religious interpretation of the controversy in media, though some may still deduce other messages from the circumstances of this incident).

### **Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

Due to the recent nature of this issue, there has been little time to analyze and come up with solutions to these problems on an international scale. Furthermore, countries typically face problems under this issue individually, without being affected by the influence of or without affecting another country. These two factors have combined to yield no UN-level solution attempts to the issue.

Within countries which have threats to secularism, the legislature and the executive are typically dominated by religious parties, leaving opposition with law-altering powers exclusively in the judiciary, if at all. As seen in the case of India, high and supreme courts with law-changing and -interpreting powers with established traditional status and authority may block and order the cessation of governmental activities or decision which they may regard to be in violation of constitutional principles, such as secularism. Protests are another significant channel through which defenders of these values may reflect their opinions, though that typically has little effect in countries which have majorities having voted for right-wing parties.

### **Possible Solutions**

Solutions to the issue must have several features: Firstly, they should be durable; even if right-wing governments come to power, these solutions should continue to be effective, ensuring the people’s religious rights. Secondly, they must be adaptable; they should not take and single case as the basis of their actions and must be applicable to all circumstances, with a vast range of majority and minority religious beliefs. Thirdly, they should have tangible reflections onto real-life, not remaining as simple declarations as many of the constitutions of the countries of concern are in this regard. Lastly, they must be all-encompassing, addressing any potential concerns from any part of daily life, which may be brought up by religiously motivated restrictions or intervention by the state in any aspect of life concerning religion.

Solutions to the issue may emphasize international collaboration as a key tool in a solution, with support or intervention by neighboring states or regional (or international) mechanism being a possibility for action upon violation. Solutions must also discern between actions that are genuinely taken to instate public order and those that are taken to restrict religious freedoms of non-power minorities, with a consideration of the individual circumstances being a critical tool in this regard. Another thing to consider in any solutions to the issue would be the prevention of further reactionary movements in the future, with education being a potential tool in this regard.

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