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Podcast Transcript

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A Global Study on Government Restrictions and Social Hostilities Related to Religion

Podcast with **Katayoun Kishi** (3 December 2018).

Interviewed by **Benjamin P. Marcus**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/a-global-study-on-government-restrictions-and-social-hostilties-related-to-religion/

Benjamin Marcus (**BM**): *My guest today is Dr Katayoun Kishi, a research associate at Pew Research Centre. She oversees the Centre's Annual Study on Global Restrictions on Religion. Her previous work has included research on topics such as identity politics and religion, international conflict, survey research and food security. Before joining Pew Research Centre, Kishi held a position at the United States Institute of Peace. She earned a doctorate in Government and Politics with a concentration on Comparative Politics and Quantitative Methodology from the University of Maryland. Today, we'll be discussing Pew's 9th Annual Report analysing the extent to which Governments and societies around the world impinge on religious beliefs and practices. The studies are part of the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation. Hello Dr Kishi, and welcome to the Religious Studies Project. I'd like to begin by asking: are government restrictions on religion and social hostilities related to religion increasing or decreasing? And I suppose we should also ask how you define those terms?*

Katayoun Kishi (**KK**): Well, thanks so much for having me. I think I will start by answering your question with a "Yes" and "No"! And it might be helpful for me to first answer the second question, about how we define government restrictions and social hostilities. So, government restrictions are a wide variety of measures that we can look at in terms of how national governments and local governments might infringe religious beliefs and practices. These might be through policies and laws, but it might also be through actions like harassment or discrimination against religious groups. On the social side, we want to look at things entirely sort-of separately from government actors. So, social groups, individuals, even religious groups themselves and how they interact with religious groups in the country. So here we look at things like terrorism, conflict in the country, mob violence involving

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religion, even tensions between religious groups themselves. So, to answer your question about whether government restrictions are increasing, the answer is "Yes". In 2016 – the latest year that we have data – we found that 28% of countries fell into our top two categories of government restriction. So they had either very high levels or high levels of government restrictions on religion. And that was an increase from 25% of countries the year before. Now when we look at social hostilities there was actually no real change. So 27% of countries fell in those top two categories, but 27% of countries fell into those categories in 2015 as well. So while we saw sort-of stagnant levels of social hostilities around the world, we saw a slight increase in government restrictions. Now something to point out, though, is that we look at 198 countries round the world each year. And 28% of those fell into the very high categories for government restrictions. That means a large subset fell into low or moderate levels of government restrictions. And the same thing happens with social hostility. So that gives you a little bit of context in terms of how many countries fall into the very high levels and the countries people were concerned about. But also, keep in mind that a very large share of the world's countries actually have low to moderate levels of government restrictions or social hostilities involving religion.

BM: *And when you read the report, what becomes clear is these aren't small countries that are in the high to very high levels of . . . . Can you talk about: what are these countries and what percentage of the population, broadly, are falling under countries that have high to very high restrictions on religion?*

KK: Yes, that's a good question. A lot of the countries that are in these categories are actually the most populous in the world. So places like India: India had the highest levels of social hostilities of any country in the world in 2016. Places like China had the highest levels of government restrictions on religion in 2016. So when you look at all of the countries that have very high or high levels, it's something like eight in ten of the world's population live in countries that have high or very high levels of restrictions. Now take that with a grain of salt, given that restrictions in these countries do not impact everyone in those countries in the same way. Often it's religious minorities who are targeted, and who bear the brunt of these types of either government restriction or social hostilities. But yes, definitely when you look at the twenty-five most populous countries in the world, many of them do fall into those higher or very high categories.

BM: *And I just want to note for our Listeners that North Korea is not on the list – is that right?*

KK: Correct. Yes. We look at 198 countries and territories, so six territories we look at, places like Western Sahara for example. All of the UN-recognised countries are in our data set except for North

Korea, just because of methodological issues. We don't have sourcing that we feel confident in to be able to capture what's going on in North Korea, the same way that we can for other countries around the world.

BM: *That's helpful. And what would you say to Listeners who are concerned: here we are, two people with American accents. Is this a report that holds the US up as a gold standard or . . . ? Where does the US fit in, in the rankings?*

KK: We try not to treat the US, really, any differently from any other country. The only methodological difference really, when we look at the US, is that we have slightly different sourcing. And that's only because the state departments' International Religious Freedom Reports that we rely on for all the other countries, the state department does not produce a report for the US. So we use all of the other eighteen or so different sources that we use for every other country. But then we also supplement that for the US with the FBI's hate crime statistics and then also the Department of Justice's Religious Freedom newsletters. So we try to capture similar amounts of information for the US. (**5:00**) And we also train our coders, since our coders are American, not to introduce their own biases when looking at the US – so stick to what appears in the sources. If they have anecdotal knowledge of things going on in the country, try not to introduce those other than in really specific circumstances and if it's something that's been vetted through multiple different news sources. So, in that sense, we try not to treat the US differently. We are cognisant of the fact that a lot of our sources or most of our sources are English language sources. And part of that is just out of necessity. We are all English language speakers. We don't have in-house language expertise on the wide variety of languages that are spoken across the 198 different countries around the world. So what we did do, a few years back, was analyse looking at Spanish language sources in a few countries. And going through the same methodology, using those Spanish language global sources, and comparing that to the result that we found when using our regular English language sources. And what we found was that there was really no difference: that our scores basically came out the same, whether we used the local Spanish language sources or the English language ones. So we feel pretty confident that we have a wide variety of sources that we look at from a variety of organisations and different bents and different biases and we try to factor all of that in. And we feel confident in the English language sources that we use.

BM: *And to some extent, I think, the proof is in the pudding. The US is not ranked as the least restrictive in terms of government restrictions and it's not the least social hostilities. So what did you find there, about the United States?*

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KK: Absolutely. So the US ranks in the moderate category, usually, for government restrictions. So that's surprising to some people, but some of that depends on the types of indicators that we look at. So when looking at government restrictions, we don't only look at sort of negative restrictions on religion – so things like harassment or discrimination – although the US does have incidents that fall into that category as well. But we also look at sort of positive restrictions, so to speak. So, incidents where religious groups are benefitted over others, or certain privileges or benefits are given to all religious groups in the country, or only religious groups that register in the country. So in the US, for example, religious groups are able to register and receive tax benefit as non-profit organisations. So that technically counts as a restriction in our data set. Now that's something that is up for debate. Some people disagree with the use of these types of positive benefits as a so-called restriction. And we invite everyone to calculate our indexes and use their data to their own purposes. In the US, other than the registration and the tax benefits, you also have some incidents of harassment, though typically in federal prison. For example, prisoners will be denied halal foods or kosher foods, they will be forced to shave their beards if they are Muslim, for example. So a lot of the incidents that we see involve federal prisons as well, and sometimes Religious Land Use and Property-type cases – where a group will be denied the ability to build a mosque or build a church where they want to, and are suing for that religion. In terms of social hostilities, the US actually ranks high on our list. So very high being the top category, but then high being the second highest. And a lot of that is due to hate crimes being on the rise in the US. So, particularly looking at Muslims and anti-Semitic hate-crimes, in 2016 that number continued to rise. And, in fact, assaults against Muslims in the FBI hate crime data was at an all-time high since the post-9/11 2001 era. So we're definitely seeing an increase there in the US. The high social hostilities is something that surprises a lot of people. But again, sort of like you were saying, the proof is in the pudding. That is essentially what our sources are telling us.

BM: *Right. And can you talk about how the US is fairing in the region? And I also found it fascinating, in the report you really call out what's happening in Europe. So can you talk about the comparison between the Americas region and the European area, as well?* (**10:00**)

KK: Sure. So, the US in comparison with our direct neighbours: Canada, for example, ranks pretty low in terms of both government restrictions as well as social hostilities – the US certainly has more incidents of social hostilities than in Canada. Compared to Mexico: in Mexico you see a little bit more restrictions on things like worship, for example. And so it's not . . . there are a few differences there, but it's not perhaps as stark as it is with Canada. Looking at Latin America more broadly – looking at South American countries – again, you see things like restrictions on missionaries, on worship, on proselytising. It's a little bit more . . . . Catholicism is more ingrained in government privileges and

receives more benefits. And you don't see that equivalent type of singling out of a certain religion, legally, in the United States. So a lot of variation in the Americas. But, in general, the Americas actually rank fairly low compared to other regions around the world. So, pretty consistently, the median score or the average score for countries in the Americas is much lower than the average scores in any other region around the world. You mentioned Europe. We often look at the US and then look at Western Europe in particular, but also just Europe at large. But something that we really noticed in 2016, looking at Europe, was this rise of nationalism. So both from a government perspective with nationalist political parties or candidates, and then also on the social side – nationalist social groups or organisations. In particular, we focused on nationalist groups that targeted religious groups around the world. So not looking at nationalism targeted towards certain races or ethnic groups, but in particular against religions. And what we found was that, generally, nationalism is on the rise around the world, but that was mostly concentrated in Europe. So about a third of European countries had nationalist political parties or candidates that espoused these types of positions, and would call for the removal of certain religious groups from the country, or the severe cutting down on worship practices of certain religions, typically Muslims. Similarly with social groups, thirty-two countries around the world had nationalist social groups or organisations that were actively targeting religious groups. Twenty-five of those were in European countries. So, again, these were both increases from the year before in this type of group's activities. And while nationalism is not a new concept, it was certainly on the rise around the world and particularly in Europe.

BM: *And it seemed from the report that Muslims are certainly receiving the lion's share of the hate directed by these nationalist groups, especially in Europe. But I was surprised to see how disproportionately Jews were represented in the data, as victims of social hostilities and government restrictions. Can you talk a little bit more about that?*

KK: Yes. Relative to their global population size, Jews are very disproportionately impacted by harassment and discrimination, both by governments and by social groups. Year after year we see that Christians, Muslims, these larger groups are harassed in a large number of countries around the world. But then Jews will rank, typically, third or fourth in terms of the highest number of countries where they are harassed. And especially given how small a population they are, it's quite remarkable. We saw a lot of the nationalist groups really focussing on Muslims in 2016 as their target. Jews remained a target in Europe for these groups, as well as other social groups as well, just like they do year after year. There hasn't been a large spike in harassment of Jews, especially in Europe, but it's been at a consistently high level for the past decade.

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BM: *It did seem that there's a trend upward, though, for hate crime or social hostilities against Jews?*

KK: Yes, a slight increase. So, usually one or two countries will be added on each year. So it's not as stark as when you look at the harassment of Muslims in the past few years. But it certainly is on the rise.

BM: *And so we've talked about the Americas and Europe, but the report very clearly shows that, still, the most government restrictions and social hostilities are in the Middle East and North Africa. And 2016 was an interesting year to be looking at the Middle East and North Africa with the fall-out of the Arab Spring and continuing conflicts in different countries within the Middle East and North Africa. What did you see in the data? And has it changed at all since the beginning of the Arab Spring?*

KK: (**15:00**) So the Middle East/ North Africa region, as you said, consistently has the highest average scores. When you look at it compared to other regions . . . . So in terms of giving you some context for what the regions are that you'd look at, it's the Middle East, North Africa, the Asia Pacific region, Europe, the Americas and Sub-Saharan Africa. So compared to all of those regions, the Middle East ranks the highest consistently. And a lot of that is due to government favouritism of certain religions: typically, Sunni Islam and also, at the same time, government harassment and discrimination against minority religions. In 2016, something interesting that we had to make a methodological change for was the conflict in Yemen, and actually characterising the Houthi rebels in Yemen as a government actor – as opposed to a social actor as we had the years before. And that was a methodological decision based on the fact that, in 2016, the Houthis controlled enough territory in Yemen that included over half of Yemen's population. So we felt it was appropriate to attribute actions by them as government actions, since they had such complete control over that much territory in Yemen. We didn't see huge increases in the Middle East in 2016. But everything was consistently high, as it has been. But something interesting that we did see in the Middle East in the years before, was – like, you mentioned the Arab Spring – and so if you look at our trend data for the past ten years, you see a sudden spike especially in social hostilities in the Middle East, right after 2011-2012. And then that sort-of has gone down again and levelled off to pre-Arab Spring levels, in recent years – keeping in mind that this is still considerably higher than most other regions, at times doubling the average score of other regions around the world.

BM: *That reminds me of something that you bring up in the report, which I'd love for you to talk about a bit more, which is the relationship between government restrictions and social hostilities. Do these things seem to be twinned? If there are higher government restrictions are there also higher social*

hostilities all the time? Or does it not always pair up that way?

KK: Oftentimes we will see them correlated. So if Government restrictions are high somewhere, social hostilities will be high. And it's not clear to us which causes which – or if there even is a causal relationship between them. But, yes, in a lot of countries high government restrictions means high social hostilities. There are really important exceptions to this rule. So, for example, China. China is a great example of how a country can have very high levels – in 2016, the highest levels – of government restrictions on religion and then, typically, have low to moderate levels of social hostilities. And the Chinese Government might tell you that these things are related, right? That having really strict government restrictions on religion encourages social harmony in the country and reduces social hostilities. We can't really speak to that. I don't know if that is truly what's happening. You have the opposite happening in certain other places. So Australia, for example, has high levels of social hostilities but very low levels of government restrictions on religion. So it's not clear, exactly, if these things are caused. But, yes, typically we do see that they have a positive relation. So, as one increases the other one increases. In the Middle East, in particular, a lot of these countries have high social hostilities, most of these countries have high or very high level of government restrictions. And so there isn't a clear relationship between high government restrictions leading to lower social hostilities in the way that you see in China.

BM: *That's really interesting to me. I wonder if you can talk a bit more about methodology. I wonder if, at this moment, Listeners are wondering, "What do you actually mean by government restrictions and social hostilities?" You mentioned that a little bit earlier, but could you talk about how many metrics do you use for each category, and how many data sets or sources that you used to measure government restrictions and social hostilities?*

KK: Sure. So let me walk you through the entire process, from start to finish. So each year we look at eighteen different sources. We wait for all of them to come out for the most recent year data. So typically we're a little bit lagged. So right now, in mid-2018, we are coding data for 2017, for example. So these eighteen sources include things like the state department international religious freedom reports, like I mentioned earlier; NGO reports, so – Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House reports; other government organisations – the UK Foreign commonwealth office, the other US departments, like the Department of Justice; and the UN, of course, as well. So we try to cover a lot of different sources that have a lot of different angles and potential biases. And we use them to check each other. (**20:00**) So if we see something mentioned in one source and we see a competing description of that event in a different source, we will typically look at them and compare

them and see what the more conservative estimate is. If it is something like the number of deaths that were reported, we look at which source has more details, etc. So it's really useful that we have so many different sources that we can play off of each other and compare. So once those sources are available to us we have a team of five interns or five coders that come in each year for a twelve-week coding process. They look at 198 countries. Each coder is given one country and is paired with another coder who is also looking at that same country, at the same time, but completely independently. They don't discuss their results, they don't compare as they are going through the process of reading the sources and answering the questions. Once that's over, they get together and they reconcile. So they go through question by question, and see which answer they got to, and if there is a disagreement they talk it though and they come to an agreement on what the correct answer should be. If they can't reach an agreement they come to myself, or to the research analyst on the team, and we make a final decision. So once that reconciliation process is over, we then have a score for each country around the world. So let me talk a little bit about what goes into that score – like you mentioned – what the different indicators are. So for government restrictions on religion, we have twenty different indicators that we look at. I mentioned earlier, these can be things like laws and policies, they can be things like government actions, government treatment of minority groups, etc. Each of these twenty different indicators have a possible score of zero to one. Sometimes the options are just zero and one, sometimes it's more fine-grained: 0.33, 0.67, etc. The coders will select what the correct answer should be. Each of those numerical values are associated with a specific situation. So, "Does the government have a freedom of religion or belief clause in its constitution?": "Yes"/ "No"/ "Yes – but with restrictions" – something like that. Once we have scores for the twenty different indicators, we can add them up and then divide that score by two. And that gives us an index between zero and ten, with ten indicating the highest levels of government restrictions. Very similarly for social hostilities we have thirteen different indicators. So things like mob violence, terrorism, conflict involving religion. Again, each of those has a maximum score of one. We can add all of them up and divide by 1.3 and we end up with those zero to ten point indexes. So when I say something like, "a country has very high levels of government restrictions", that might mean that they have a score of nine out of ten, for example, on the government restrictions index or the social hostilities index – which is what we call them. So that's essentially the coding process. The twelve-week period would start really quickly, usually, and we code all 198 countries and come to a conclusion about them. We might include some additional coding variables each year, about something that we think might be interesting. So a year or two ago we looked at official state religions around the world: which countries have an official religion; which don't have an official one but sort-of prefer a religion over others; which have strict separation of church and state. And that was all taken from data that we included in this coding period as well, but

were not included in the indexes. The indexes we leave the same each year, so that we can compare the trends from year to year. So I hope that answers your question about methodologies? It's quite long-winded!

BM: *Yes. That's very helpful. And I wanted to make clear that, for researchers who are listening, all of your data is available, right?*

KK: Yes. All of our data. Each year, we upload the full data set to our website, pewresearch.org. And we're always really happy to hear from researchers that want to use our data. If anyone needs advice about how to recalculate our indexes, if there are certain indicators that might be more useful to be taken out of the index for your research purposes, we're always really happy to hear from researchers and to help in any way that we can.

BM: *That's very helpful, thank you. I wonder if you can just mention . . . . So you mentioned that Australia, the United States are very high in the social hostilities. Is that because data is more freely available for the United States and Australia compared to, say, Iran or Yemen? Does the availability of data seem to have an effect on which countries are ranked high or low?*

KK: That's a great question, and that's something that we were worried about as well, looking at the sourcing that was available. And, for the most part, each country that we look at does have multiple sources available. There are cases in which the only source that we have available is the state departments' international religious freedom report. But, typically, those countries are very small – typically very small Island nations, with populations less than half a million. And so not only is it that we only have the one source, but typically there's not a very high level of government restrictions going on. (**25:00**) And what we find is that when there are high levels of government restrictions in the smaller countries, typically the other sources that we look at will also cover them. In terms of availability on the ground – in some cases, like in North Korea – yes it's just not the case that we can get reliable information for that country and so we leave it out of the analysis. But for all the other countries that we look at, despite the varying levels of access given to journalists, we feel confident that we have enough information coming out of the country that we can rely on. We've also done analyses in the past looking at the length of the report, how much information is in our sources for each country, and seeing if the length of the report and the amount of information is linked to higher levels of government restrictions or social hostility. So, your question about if more information leads to higher scores: what we've found is that's not really the case; that it doesn't really have an effect on our index scores whether the reports are longer, whether the sourcing is longer and there's more

information. Usually the countries that have a lot going on in the country will have more sources available and more information about them.

BM: *Thank you. And we're running up on time, so I wonder if, to close, you could just speak about where this report leaves us: what do your findings tell us about the state of religious discourse in the contemporary world? Are things getting better or worse? Do you have any guesses about where things are going? I know that's a really difficult question for social scientists, but, where are we now? And what does that tell us about religion around the globe?*

KK: So, 2016 marked the second year of increases after a few years of relatively steady decreases in restrictions and hostilities. So it's too early to say if this is a trend in an increase direction, but certainly this is the second consecutive year that we have seen an increase. Now we tend to look at things globally, and we look at 28% of countries have high, or very high levels of restrictions on religion, etc. But I always encourage people to look more contextually at the data. So, yes, it's interesting to look at the global picture and get a quick snapshot of what's going on. But it's really more useful to look at specific countries over time, or even – in the regional contexts – looking at how a certain region is behaving. Because that can really shed a lot of light onto what the specific religious freedom issues are in that area. So, for example, in the Middle East it might be something like government favouritism of religion, whereas in Central Asia it might be governments that are outwardly hostile towards religion and severely restrict it in other ways. And these countries might have very similar scores. I always use the example of Saudi Arabia and China. Both have very high levels of government restrictions on religion but could not be more different in why that is the case. So it's always really useful to look at the country's specific context, and to really use your knowledge from other areas of research, to sort-of illustrate what the data are that we're showing you, as well.

BM: *Well, thank you so much. We really appreciated speaking with you today. I hope our Listeners enjoyed listening, as well. I'd encourage all of our Listeners to go onto the Pew Research Centre website. You can go to pewresearch.org. You can also download the report that we've been discussing for free. So thank you again, Dr Kishi, and I hope all of our listeners feel free to check out Pew Research Centre. Thank you.*

KK: Thank you.

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