

## Diane Ala'i



Diane has been a Representative to the United Nations for the Bahá'í International Community, United Nations Office in Geneva since 1992. In this capacity, she has participated in numerous sessions of the UN General Assembly, the Human Rights Council (and its predecessor, the former Commission on Human Rights and its Sub-Commission), the Commission on the Status of Women, other HR Committees, and the

UNHCR ExCom. Previously a member of the Bahá'í International Community delegation to the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993), she served as Head of delegation for the Bahá'í International Community at the Third World Conference Against Racism in Durban (2001). Diane Ala'i also works with other non-governmental organisations accredited to the United Nations. She is currently the Chair of the NGO Sub-Committee on Freedom of Religion and Belief. As an NGO representative, she has worked closely with the various mechanisms of the Human Rights Council (and former Commission), often participating in the coordination of NGO input. She has also helped to train interns of the European Union.

## FoRB was the poor parent Civil & Political Rights

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Baroness Anelay yesterday spoke of increasingly secular societies - in the sense that religion will have less & less space, UN no different (both in terms of states and HR NGO)

- seems extremely normal stand up & suffer for political opinion, but when Bahá'í students in Iran insist on not lying about their faith and thus cannot enter universities, they are sometimes perceived as stubborn and/or fanatical – why don't they just write Muslim!

Then the issue of defamation of religion was raised, spoken of by Elizabeth, but again, it was more about protecting freedom of expression than FoRB. And the position of the Bahá'í International Community on this issue is that we believe that the independent search for the truth the spiritual responsibility of each one of us. Thus in order to search, one should be allowed to question, and needs freedom of expression.

But when we started facing violent extremism in the name of religion, the visibility of FoRB changed completely, coming to the forefront. But the challenges remain the same:

- What does FoRB mean when over 30 or 70 (depending on the definition) countries have a state religion? (And don't think it is they are all in the same region, there are some Europeans ones too!) There may be privileges infused in law, but there may also be untold discrimination, prejudice that leads to ostracization.

- What does FoRB mean when religious leaders still maintain claims of exclusivity or finality? How can we work shoulder to shoulder with others when we think we are right and everyone else is wrong?
- What does FoRB mean when governments think they can decide what is a religion and what is not? And I must say I have grown to be extremely sensitive to the terms 'monotheistic religions' or 'religions of the book' or 'heavenly religions', who defines those groups? And let's not even mention 'recognized religious minorities'.
- How can we ensure that minorities are not forgotten when they are a minority everywhere as opposed to minority in a given geographical area only? This is a real issue at the UN, because some religions have a country or a regional group that can speak for them.
- What does FoRB mean when in many countries family law is based on religious adherence? And if your religion is not recognized, or if you do not have a religion (and as a religious person I will always defend the right of humanists) how do you get married? Inherit? Etc.
- What is FoRB when secularism frowns upon, if not bans, religious expression? Yesterday the importance of religious literacy was mentioned a number of times, but how do we achieve this when secularism is the prevailing religion?
- How large must a minority be to be taken into consideration? So many times we hear the terms 'and a few other minority religions' without being mentioned.
- How many people must die because of their faith to draw the attention of the international community? How many should be in prison? And what if the persecution is rampant, no highlight, but yet treats hundreds of thousands of men, women & children as 3rd class citizens, with only the right to survive?

The point is that 30 years of FoRB mandate practice, and nearly 70 years of UN FoRB standards, have alerted us to these important elements in order to realise FoRB, pluralism and diversity. These are also indicators of pluralism and diversity that CVE needs to be sensitized about too.

How can the UN and particularly the human rights mechanisms help clarify these questions:

Ahmed Shaheed spoke about the role of the SR:

- In their report, they will clarify issues that can then be used by civil society & individuals on the ground - they can also help governments to have bilateral conversations with others on those issues. For example, Abdelfattah Amor clearly stated that a state cannot decide what is a religion and what is not, endorsed by the subsequent SRs Asma Jahangir & Heiner Bielefeldt. (And I am certain that Ahmed Shaheed will also support this).
- They can speak publicly and raise awareness on a particular situation. And they are independent, so cannot be accused of supporting some particular governments.
- They make country visits and can give visibility to particular cases, but also meet with all religious groups and this gives minorities visibility, helps the government but also other larger religious groups to realize or acknowledge a greater diversity than the one they know or admit.

Another mechanism that the UN offers is the UPR (explain). It provides the perfect opportunity for states to remind each other that it is impossible to build resilience against extremism without respect for HR in general and FoRB in particular.

Ahead of UPR, the countries can be encouraged to hold consultations, with civil society but also with religious groups – an opportunity for them to raise their issues, but also understand their diversity.

Then, during the session, in a non-controversial manner recommendations can be made by other governments (NGO cannot speak).

Important that recommendation be precise, will help implementation and help monitoring.

Then follow-up on accepted recommendations.

Conclusion:

Despite current challenges we must not forget that violent extremism does not only stem from non state actors, but can also be state-sponsored. And this is why the UN matters.