Advancing the security of religious minorities in conflict and post-conflict situations

By Chris Chapman

At MRG we study the impact of conflict on minorities, and analyse the role that minority rights, including freedom of religion, can play both in resolving conflicts, but also in predicting and preventing them. Minorities are affected by conflicts in different ways; armed groups drawn from a minority community and pushing a minority agenda may be a principal party to a conflict; or minorities may be targeted because they are located in a strategic area; if attempts to co-opt them fail, the state may try to drive them out or eliminate them. In genocides, the state decides to eliminate a minority which is seen as in some way a threat, or a scapegoat.

Lack of security for minorities in transition or post-transition societies impacts negatively on respect for their rights. For example, in Iraq, when an election law was changed to remove reserved seats for minorities, Christians protested. As a result a wave of intimidation and killing was unleashed in the Northern city of Mosul. This had the intended effect, which was to make minorities too fearful to stand up for their rights, although it has not succeeded in silencing them entirely.

Conflict and transitions can also further negatively affect minorities by dividing them. I have often heard international observers remark about minorities “oh, they are hopelessly divided”; or “they need to identify a spokesperson who can unite them and speak for them”. For some reason a diversity of opinions and ambitions is seen as a healthy expression of vibrant democracy when it comes to majorities, but, in minorities, it is a sign of nasty in-fighting and jostling for power.

But it is also often missed that conflict makes this situation worse because minorities are often on the sidelines; they don’t have a dog in the fight. So they are often co-opted by the main parties to the conflict. This may be because their grievances fit with the political programme of the belligerent party - for example Dalits in Nepal were seen as natural allies of the Maoists. Or, their land is strategically located - this is the case of Christians, Yezidis and Shabaks of the Nineveh Plains of Iraq, which is disputed between the Federal and Kurdish governments. This has been a disaster for these communities, as they are targeted and pressured to ally with these two forces, thus exacerbating the divisions and turning them into sources of tension. On the other hand religious extremists target them in an attempt to drive them out of the country.

In each country, when we examine which communities are targeted and why, it sheds light on conflict dynamics. In Iraq, up until 2011, religious minorities were targeted for kidnapping, targeted killings and bombings. Attacks on these communities are still happening, but proportionately, they have decreased. Sunnis and Shi’a have always been targeted, since 2003, but currently, attacks on these two communities have again surged. The conflict dynamics are complex and difficult to analyse, but it is likely that the withdrawal of American, British and other Western forces has taken the focus away from non-Muslims, including Christians and other religious minorities, who were seen as proxy targets for the West. Now, the focus is on the power struggle between camps which are perceived as being Sunni and Shi’a. Turkmen also continue to be targeted because they are an important community in Kirkuk, an intensely divided and key strategic city. In Sri Lanka, Muslims and Christians are being targeted now, there is a move to construct Buddhist temples in minority areas and restrict access to Christian and Muslim places of worship. Whereas the conflict was formerly played out on ethnic lines, it is now focusing on religion; but in reality, the government is simply applying the same militaristic, authoritarian model, having exhausted the conflict with the Tamils.
In the countries of the MENA region it has not only been religious minorities that have been targeted for violence. Ethnic minorities have also been targeted, but to a lesser extent. Situations of transition and conflict generate great hope, but also uncertainty and fear. When the initial optimism for a new beginning fades and random incidents of violence and brutality generate a climate of fear, people begin to look for new certainties. This is one of the reasons that religion has been able to gain such a strong foothold in many of these countries. Religions offer a comprehensive answer to all questions both in the personal and the political spheres. In addition Islam was always the only institution with a structure and reach that could compete with the former regime’s institutions. When the latter were dismantled, Islamic institutions were left to take the field unopposed. This is one of the reasons why Islam has been such a powerful force for rallying people in this region.

Religious hatred has also been mobilized against Muslims in India, Burma and Sri Lanka. It is also extremely important to consider the internal diversity of Islam - the position of Shi’a, or Quranists, in Egypt, for example, is arguably worse than that of Christians, as they receive no official recognition.

It is important to consider the differential ways that freedom of religion issues can impact on men and women. In Iraq, our research showed that minority women suffered disproportionately from violence against their communities. Sabean Mandaean and Christian women are pressured to wear the veil; if they refuse, they are often not able to leave the house, or access employment or study opportunities. Men on the other hand are more likely to be subjected to kidnapping or targeted assassinations. In Sri Lanka, we have found that access to places of worship has become a transitional justice issue; women cited to our researchers that it was of crucial importance for them to mourn their dead at places of worship, but had been prevented from doing so.

A final point I want to make is about what the international community can learn from these transitions and what it can do better in the future. Libya, Iraq and Egypt have shown us that when civil upheavals happen, minorities can experience disproportionate levels of violence and marginalization. Before the transitions happened in their respective countries, it was not foreseen that Yezidis, Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq, Christians, Bahá’í and Shi’a in Egypt, and Tibu and Amazigh in Libya would be targeted, or marginalized so comprehensively, in the post transition dispensation. In fact, it was assumed that the overthrow of dictators would be beneficial for all sectors of society, except for the direct coterie of the regime. This assumption was based on a simplistic perception of what the issues were in these countries.

Therefore, for countries experiencing transitions, or civil upheavals, or are even at risk of entering into such a phase, it is crucial to carry out an assessment of the risks posed to different sectors of society, including minority communities, and to identify protection measures for threatened communities.

Transitions are extremely complex, and not all incidences of violence will fit into a macro-explanation of the overall process. Some minorities may be seen as having benefitted or been treated better under the former regime, so targeting them is a form of revenge (e.g. Christians and Alawites in Syria, Palestinians in Iraq). Some communities may be seen as economically successful so targeting them may result in financial gain. In some cases there may have been tensions between communities for many years but these were kept forcefully under wraps by an authoritarian government. This was the case of the clashes between the Tibu minority and the Arab Zuwayya tribe in Libya.

Simplistic explanatory models such as the Clash of Civilisations between East & West exert a strong pull - partly because they explain a conflict in a tidy way, are easy to understand and do not require extensive research into local realities. However, local-level and national-level dynamics are almost always more relevant to the people directly involved,
especially those marginalized and disenfranchised by former or current governments. An in-depth conflict analysis will need to uncover such issues that risk developing into all-out violence. For this, a sophisticated conflict analysis framework is needed, incorporating indicators of human rights, in particular minority rights, freedom of religion or belief, and women’s rights.