

The President's advisor

Length		45 min – 2,5 hours, depending on group size and if the exercise is repeated.
Difficulty		Medium
Group size		Small to medium
Aim	To help participants explore their attitudes towards rights for others in their own context, revealing and working with any resistance towards rights for all.	
Description	The participants have just been appointed as the President's religious affairs advisors and have to make recommendations on how the state should handle specific cases of FORB violations.	
Materials	Hand-outs of different cases Facilities that enable small group discussions.	
Source	Bassem Maher	

Tips for facilitators

This session tries to help participants to discover any prejudices they have in relation to who should have what rights. Do they actually want the same rights for people of other faiths or no faith, as they want for themselves? Opposing views on concrete and controversial issues in the local context can arise and create tensions. It is important to create a trusting environment so that participants feel comfortable sharing what they really think, instead of saying what they think the facilitator or others in the group want to hear. Emphasise the importance of listening and testing out our thoughts and ideas together so that they can develop.

You will need to adapted or develop cases relevant to the local context for your training. In this document we include a set of cases adapted for a Middle Eastern context and a set adapted for a South East Asian context.

Outline and instructions

Introduction	5 mins
Group work	15 mins

Presentations and feedback	25 mins
Repeat the group work, presentation and feedback with the second set of cases	40 mins
Conclusion 10 minutes	

Introduction

Welcome the participants and inform them that they have been appointed as the President or Prime minister's Religious Affairs Advisors. Tell them about the importance and sensitivity of such a position and that the president trusts them completely, and most likely will be following their recommendations and that endless resources to implement what you recommend are available. Police, courts and faith communities all come to you for advice on what should happen in relation to the different cases.

Once again emphasize how important and critical this role is.

Group work

Divide the participants into groups of three, and distribute on each group the handout that describes their case (description of the cases can be found below), and invite them to do to their groups and start the discussion to come up with one recommendation to the president. Emphasize that they will only present the recommendation without any explanations. However, they can precede the recommendation with a short preamble.

Presentation and feedback of recommendations

Each group presents their presidential recommendation. Invite the other groups to comment on the recommendation and if they agree with it or not, and why.

Repeat the round with the second set of cases

(Skip this for a shorter exercise) Hand each group a new case and repeat the group work, presentation and feedback process.

Conclusion

Sum up thoughts from the session and the significance of the choices people made. It can be easy to believe in freedom of religion or belief in theory. When we bring it down to concrete situations in our own context, our prejudices and fears can easily get in the way of accepting rights for all.

Of course few societies suddenly change from having no rights to having full rights. Usually the process of change is progressive over a long period of time. But is it important to know where we want to get to in order to identify the small steps that might be possible to take us there.

Cases adapted for a country in the Middle East

First set:

- A request has been made to the president to issue a decree/law that unifies the rules and regulations of building any worship place (let it be a mosque, a church, or a synagogue).
- A request has been made to the president to issue a law that opens up the doors for civil marriage.
- A request has been made to the president to issue a law that removes the religion statement from state ID cards.
- A request has been made to the president to amend the law that criminalizes contempt of religions, in order to increase the penalties.
- A request has been made to the president to cancel the current law that criminalizes contempt of religions.

Second set:

- A request has been made to the president (as the supreme leader of armed forces) to initiate a transparent investigation into the killing of Christians in village xxx. The investigations are to be run by a specially formed committee that consists only of civilians from the judiciary and HR organizations.
- A request has been made to the president to approve the building of a church for the Christian population in a village that currently has no churches. This request was turned down by the governor, because of substantial fears that this might lead to riots in this village, which has a high percentage of radical Muslims.
- A request has been made to the president to approve the building of a Bahaai temple.
- A request has been made to the president to approve Jehovah's Witnesses as a legally recognized faith community.
- A request has been made to the president to authorize Bahaai marriage as a legal marriage with all its benefits.
- A request has been made to the president to issue a law that reserves a certain percentage of positions in the cabinet, military, and other key positions to religious minorities (quota).

Cases adapted for a country in South East Asia

Teacher refuses to participate in prayer

Most of the children and teachers at School A in XXX belong to the majority religion. Majority religion prayers and passages from the majority religions holy texts are read every morning as part of the schools obligatory value teaching. The headteacher has received reports that one of the teachers does not fold or lift his hands in prayers. The teacher is in all matters respected and liked by parents and students alike. When asked about this, the teacher responded that as he is an atheist, not believing in any God, it goes against his conscience to raise or fold his hands in prayer.

The school's leadership is concerned that if a teacher does not join in the traditional prayers it will undermine respect for national culture and tradition that the school, in line with the government's education policy, tries to convey to the students. Community leaders have been consulted and want the teacher to have his wages cut or be fired if he continues to refuse to join in with the prayer.

The head teacher doesn't know what to do is, but as she is a distant relative of the Prime Minister, her husband suggested that she should ask the Prime Minister about advice on how to manage the situation.

Parents from the majority religion complain that their children have to participate in Christian morning prayers at school

A Christian school in a village in the northern state of YYY was founded by missionaries, but has been run by a local committee consisting of Christians from a minority tribe for several years. The school is perceived as being the best school for many miles, so some parents from the majority tribe, who adhere to the majority religion, also send their children to the school.

The school has a tradition of holding Christian morning assembly at which staff and children alike say the Lord's prayer, psalms sung and a short passage is read from the Bible as well as singing the national anthem. Recently some parents to children from the majority community have complained that their children are obliged to participate in Christian prayers and no alternative activity is offered.

During the last couple of weeks the situation in the whole state has been tense in reaction to some new laws that were passed about maintaining the culture and identity of the state's indigenous majority population. Some say that tensions are deeply related both to ethnic and religious conflict lines. There have been lethal attacks on people belonging to different minority tribes which are primarily Christian. A few days ago a curfew was imposed in the state in an attempt to curb further violence.

Encouraged by community leaders, parents from the majority community, are appealing to the Prime Minister to stop their children being forced to participate in Christian prayers. Considering the tense situation in the state it is important that the Prime Minister provides a swift response to both the parents and the school about how to best deal with the situation.

Victims of religiously motivated communal violence complain about forced marriages

A group of young Muslim women who survived recent religiously motivated communal violence in the city of NNN are complaining to the President about violations to their freedom of religion and conscience. As a consequence of violence targeted at the Muslim community, the women have had to flee to relief camps.

The camps are very crowded and both rights groups and people living in the camps have accused the state government of failing to provide the necessary humanitarian assistance to the survivors of the violence. Food resources have been scarce, the camps are on marshland causing problems for both construction and hygiene during recent heavy rain falls. Residents of the relief camps live in deplorable conditions and the perpetrators of the violence largely remain unpunished.

The women have complained to the President that the state government handed over the running of the camps to a conservative Muslim NGO. The NGO has introduced restrictions on women's freedom of movement in the camp and a conservative dress code. Against the will of the women concerned, marriages have been arranged to men from villages outside the city. The NGO says the marriages were arranged in an attempt to lessen the burden on the camps and safeguard the women's honor.

According to the women, the marriages took place with the knowledge and indirect support of the State government. The women now want the state to take over the running of the camp and the marriages to be annulled so that they may return to their studies in the city.