

**Forum:** Human Rights Council

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## TOPIC 1: The issue of prisoners of conscience

### LibGuide

#### I. Introduction to the Topic

The theme of this conference is “How do we ensure sustainability through multilateral cooperation” and the delegates should be aiming to collaboratively build a resolution which protects and prevents these prisoners of conscience. As the delegate of the Human Rights Council, the delegates are encouraged to aim for the further development of human rights so that this conference can guide the United Nations to a more sustainable future.

Prisoners of conscience, a term first coined by Amnesty International in the early 1960s, are people who find themselves behind bars because of their beliefs, expressions, or non-violent actions that challenge the established norms, policies, or authorities of their respective societies. The phrase also describes people who have endured imprisonment or other forms of persecution as a result of peacefully expressing their strongly held opinions. Ever since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, fundamental rights like freedom of speech and freedom of thought should be respected by governments; yet, over the past few years, we have seen an increase in the number of prisoners of conscience around the world, many of whom are related to media and journalism. The issue is prevalent in countries that have weaker laws on human rights, especially free speech. Governments suppressing the citizen’s voice are heavily violating the right to freedom of speech, expression, conscience, and thought of their citizens.

- International

On an international level, many countries have developed and adopted repressive authorities like Myanmar, Venezuela, Russia, and Syria. Along with those regimes are the growth of oppressive measures coming from governments that limit citizens' freedom of speech on the internet, especially social media. As governments worldwide continue to strike their regulations regarding freedom of speech, the number of prisoners of conscience has witnessed a significant increase over the past few years.

- National

In some special cases like in Afghanistan, the issue of prisoners of conscience is even more prevalent. According to Prisoners Of Conscience, the number of peaceful protesters imprisoned here is remarkably high. Moreover, not only journalists and bloggers are arrested because of their coverage of the Taliban's horrendous actions, but also innocent citizens who are protesting against the government peacefully are murdered. Civilians' and human rights supporters' freedoms are under significant threat in Afghanistan. Even though this issue has been raised on the international stage, it is not likely that the situation will change as long as the government is controlled by the Taliban.

## II. Definition of Key Terms & Concepts

**Prisoner of Conscience:** Anyone who is incarcerated solely due to their race, sexual orientation, religion, or political beliefs. They are the main victims of this issue, and their actions are considered criminal activity by their governments while in fact, they fight in peace and carry out nonviolent dissent.

**Freedom of Conscience:** The freedom of conscience covers all principles of ethics and values that a human being believes in. No restrictions should be placed on these personal convictions as long as they are not imposed on others with bad intentions and hurt other people. In the issue of prisoners of conscience, the freedom of conscience is violated heavily. Some governments view these personal convictions as harmful and criminal, imprisoning those who only hold their own beliefs.

**Freedom of Expression:** Freedom of Expression is guaranteed to protect the freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly, and the right to petition the government. This fundamental freedom is protected by Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet, in many countries, like Afghanistan or Russia, this freedom is violated and prohibited. While in other countries, it is often limited. Governments have the right to prohibit hateful and discerning speeches, but it should not be the case where they abuse that power to suppress nonviolent disputes.

**Political Prisoner:** An imprisoned person because of their contrasting actions to their government's belief. This term has often overlapped with prisoners of conscience since the 1960s, but the latter noticeably fight in peace and do not hold beliefs that threaten the governmental system. Still, political prisoners are also a victim of this issue, as they try to challenge the government's existing power system.

**Nonviolent Resistance:** A protest and advocacy tactic carried out by individuals or organisations that avoid physical brutality to the advantage of civil disobedience, protests, boycotts, and other peaceful

means of accomplishing change, especially in the case of disagreement with the government's regulations or actions. It has been shown to be more effective than armed struggle in the fight against legal systems. In reality, this type of resistance is adopted and conducted by prisoners of conscience. This nonviolent resistance is considered criminal activity by some governments, leading to the political imprisonment of these peaceful fighters.

**Diplomatic Pressure:** Utilising diplomatic channels, diplomacy, and international connections to pressure governments to release political prisoners and protect human rights. This method is crucial to the wave against torturing prisoners of conscience in several countries. Only through this pressure, from other countries and NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, does the government pay attention to their wrongdoings against human rights.

**Special Rapporteur:** An independent expert who works with international organisations like the United Nations that bring up an issue of human rights abuses to global awareness. These individuals are also the key to investigating, reporting, and promoting the violations, including cases of prisoners of conscience.

### III. Key Stakeholders

**Prisoners of Conscience:** The people who are most affected by this issue are the prisoners of conscience themselves. They are imprisoned for simply exercising their human rights of freedom of expression, political stance, religion, and belief. They can be imprisoned for years and subjected to forms of ill-treatment.

**Journalists:** Journalists and people of the media often become prisoners of conscience due to their outspoken opinions under a repressive regime. They are a major stakeholder as these individuals, when imprisoned, are subjected to torture and abuse for writing on topics that are controversial. There has been an increase in the number of journalists detained, surging 20% from 2020 to 2021.

**Governments:** Governments are mostly the offenders to the prisoners of conscience. However, the governments are also responsible to prevent prisoners of conscience from happening as it is the human right of all citizens to be equally treated. Also, governments play the role in conducting multilateral and bilateral diplomatic communication to address the issue of foreigners becoming prisoners of conscience in a foreign territory. As the governments play a huge role in this issue, it is important to include the governments as the stakeholders.

**Amnesty International:** Amnesty International's founder created the term "prisoners of conscience" when describing the two Portuguese students who had each received a seven-year prison sentence for

raising a glass to freedom under a dictatorial government. The organisation is a stakeholder because they work to protect individuals at risk of having their human rights violated. The detention of a prisoner of conscience threatens respect for human rights. Amnesty International works to research and campaign for the release of prisoners of conscience.

**Human Rights Watch:** Human Rights Watch is an international organisation dedicated to defending and promoting human rights. Two ways Human Rights Watch researchers seek to identify instances of human rights breaches are by investigating abuse scenes and conducting in-person interviews with witnesses and authorities. They expose the facts and pressure people of power to respect rights and secure justice. They are a stakeholder as many prisoners of conscience are being imprisoned for expressing their beliefs, which violates their human rights.

**Prisoners of Conscience Charity:** Prisoners of Conscience is a UK charity that provides financial and practical assistance to prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders. They help transform the lives of prisoners of conscience through ways such as providing employability support in order for people to re-qualify and re-establish their careers. The charity operates in many countries around the world, including Afghanistan, Cameroon, Occupied Palestinian Territories, and the United States.

#### **IV. Key Issues including Background Information**

**Key Issue 1:** Wilmington Ten were nine men and a woman who was sentenced in the United States. On February 6th, 1971, due to the rising conflicts and tensions between the races in the US, the white-owned grocery store was firebombed, and while the firefighters were responding to the fire, they said that the snipers in church shot the firefighters. Only two days after that, the North Carolina governor used armed forces to break into the church and during this violent operation, two people have died and six people got injured. Later, the ten suspects in the church were mostly sentenced to 29 years of imprisonment because of the conspiracy towards them and were later released after a few years of imprisonment.

**Key Issue 2:** In 2019, Dr. Li Wenliang was one of the doctors who first reported the existence of Covid-19 and its deadliness to the public. However, this led Li Wenliang and many other whistle-blowers to be arrested by the Chinese government under the name of spreading rumours.

**Key Issue 3:** The Russian authorities have detained Alsu Kurmasheva under the crime of failing to register as a foreign agent. Not only Alsu Kurmasheva, but the Russian governments have strictly

controlled the media and journalists in Russia, regulating information which stood against the Russian Federation's stance.

## V. Timeline of Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

### Timeline of Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

Date	Description of event
1961	Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty International, coined the phrase "prisoners of conscience" to refer to two Portuguese students who had each received a seven-year prison sentence for raising a glass to freedom under a dictatorial government.
1962	In August, Nelson Mandela was arrested for leaving the country without a passport and encouraging workers to strike. He was detained for 27 years.
1979	Wei Jingsheng, a Chinese pro-democracy activist, is imprisoned for his "Fifth Modernization" campaign. Wei was arrested for his outspoken views.
2001	In response to the 9/11 attacks, the United States established Guantánamo Bay to hold detainees. Guantánamo Bay was a place where neither US nor international law applied. Many held at the camp were later determined to have little or no connection to al-Qaeda or the Taliban.
2010-2012	Arab Spring, a series of pro-democracy uprisings and protests, took place in the Middle East and North Africa. This led to a number of journalists being killed and detained for covering the Arab Spring and its aftermath.
2018	Jamal Khashoggi was a Saudi journalist who believed in free speech. He left Saudi Arabia when Prince Mohammed bin Salman came to power, later writing an article on the arrests made under new leadership. He was assassinated by the Saudi government in Istanbul in October of 2018.
2019	Founder of WikiLeaks Julian Assange is arrested on charges related to the release of classified information.

## VI. Possible Challenges & Solutions

**Key Issue 1:** Until now, issues related to prisoners of conscience have not been solved and this example of the Wilmington 10 was the perfect example of people who were being conspired because of their races which even led to actual imprisonment. Acknowledging the fact that these kinds of discrimination acts and imprisonment of conscience is strongly against human rights, delegates are recommended to define the delegation stance in this topic and either build better systems to prevent and further support the prisoners of conscience from being sentenced and rehabilitate to the society after imprisonment or research reasonings for the imprisonment which determines why the prisoners have violated the law in that delegation.

**Key Issue 2:** In 2019, it was a disastrous decision of the Chinese government to hide the unidentified danger of Covid-19, and this decision has further led to an unprepared pandemic for the whole world. Understanding that there may be further issues which require professional knowledge from the medical staff, it is important to protect the rights and safety of medical staff to achieve the bigger goal of preserving the rights of healthcare for all citizens. However, other delegates can mention the rising issue of fake news in the media, and how fake news can cause unnecessary social anxiety.

**Key Issue 3:** Expressing the freedom of press, and recognizing the role of the press to inform necessary information to the public, it is important that the press must be liberated and protected to enable the true functions of a press. However, currently many of the press in the Russian Federation has lost freedom due to the strict regulation of the Russian governments and the circumstances that follow after the violation of regulation may lead to detention or even imprisonments of the journalists. On the other hand, the perspective of the Russian Federation may be that the censorship of the press is only to prevent fake news and to enable defamation lawsuits.

## VII. Recommendations for Resolution Writing including Research

In the resolution writing and research, please take full advantage of this chair report and the LibGuide sources as they provide information regarding the topic. It is important that you understand your country's stance on prisoners of conscience and freedom of speech as it will strengthen the delegates' argument in the debate. Thus, delegates are advised to first conduct research on freedom of speech and current or past prisoners of conscience in their assigned country before writing their resolutions. Delegates may wish to refer to sources such as World Press Freedom Index and other sources that indicate freedom of expression

in countries as they are connected to the issue of prisoners of conscience. Delegates' perspectives must be free from any bias or personal opinions regarding the issue.

Although not necessary, it will be helpful to research other countries' stances beforehand in order to form alliances during draft resolutions and during the debate. Delegates should form alliances with countries that have similar views on freedom of expression.

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## IX: Additional Resources

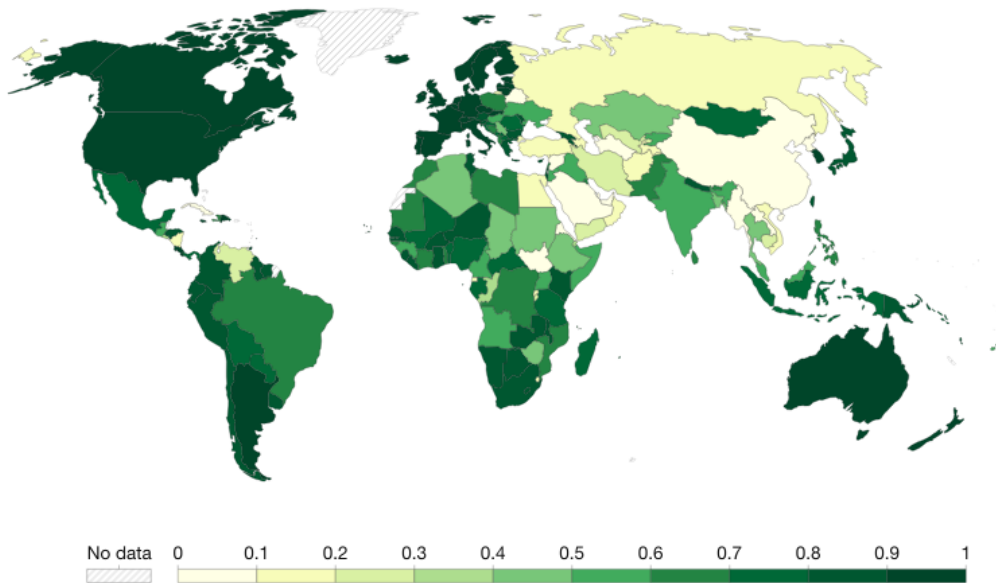


World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) map of the world 2023 (Reporters Without Borders)

## Freedom of expression index, 2022



Based on the expert assessments and index by V-Dem. It captures the extent to which people can voice their views and the media can present different political perspectives. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most free).



Data source: OWID based on V-Dem (v13)

[OurWorldInData.org/democracy](https://OurWorldInData.org/democracy) | CC BY

Freedom of expression index in 2022 map (Our World In Data)



*Protest in Cologne, Germany, against Christian persecution in China, September 14, 2019 (Catholic News Agency)*