

Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Wednesday 27th March 2024, 18:00 to 19:15

Minute

Present

MSPs

John Mason MSP
Stephen Kerr MSP
Pam Gosal MSP

Invited guests

Professor Nazila Ghanea - UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Non-MSP Group Members

Craig Horne
Jamie Spurway
Dr Maureen Sier
Frances Hume
Keith Mallard
Rev Gary Dean
Alan Meldrum
Carol Wilde
Chris Ringland
Mridula Chakrabaty
Oliver Lane
Richa S
Muslim Council of Scotland
Fiona Brodie
Fraser Sutherland
Patricia Findlay
Ravinder Kaur Nijjar
Sameer Hussain
Shona Hallam
Stanley Grossman
Stephen Scholes
Ephraim Borowski
Gareth Jones
Ravi L

Apologies

Michael Vietch
Malcolm (Steadfast Global)
Lorraine McMahon
Nigel Kenny
Rt Rev Sally Foster-Fulton
Brian Miller

Welcome & Approval of Minutes

John Mason MSP addressing the absence of another MSP needed to proceed with approving the minutes of the meeting. He mentions the agenda for the meeting and introduces himself as the convener of the cross-party group on Freedom of Religion or Belief. He also mentions the expected attendance of other MSPs.

Apologies from several individuals are mentioned, and John Mason MSP invites others to provide additional apologies if needed. He then introduces Dr Maureen Sier from Interfaith Scotland, who will introduce the speaker for the evening, Professor Nazila Ghanea, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief.

Later, Stephen Kerr MSP & Pam Gosal MSP attended. The minutes were approved by Stephen Kerr MSP and seconded by Dr Maureen Sier.

Presentation from Dr Nazila Ghanea

Professor Nazila Ghanea provides background information on her role as Special Rapporteur, detailing her responsibilities, including reporting to the United Nations, receiving communications about violations, and visiting countries to assess the situation of freedom of religion or belief. She discusses the importance of freedom of religion or belief as a human right and its recognition in international law.

She highlights her recent report on advocacy of hatred based on religion or belief, emphasising the distinction between state-driven hatred and societal-level hatred. She discusses the challenges of addressing hatred and the need for a more comprehensive approach beyond criminalisation, including education, engagement, and dialogue.

Professor Ghanea stresses the role of civil society actors, faith-based organisations, and prevention efforts in addressing hatred and promoting cohesion in society. She concludes by urging for a broader and more nuanced response to hatred based on

religion or belief, acknowledging its intersection with other forms of hatred and its impact on individuals and communities.

John Mason MSP expresses his gratitude for the presentation.

Q&A

John Mason MSP and Professor Ghanea discussed various aspects of freedom of religion or belief, focusing on international legal obligations and practical challenges faced in different countries. John Mason highlights the importance of allowing individuals to change their religion or belief without coercion, while expressing concern about the gap between idealism and reality. Professor Ghanea explains the legal standards regarding freedom of religion or belief, emphasising the prohibition of coercion in religious matters and the need for universal human rights standards. The discussion touched on specific cases, such as religious persecution in Japan in questioning from Oliver Lane, and broader issues, including the marginalisation of Muslims in the UK and Scotland. There is also a mention of the hate crime act in Scotland and the UK's obligations in promoting freedom of religion or belief globally, with Stephen Kerr MSP questioning the effectiveness of government initiatives in this regard. Professor Ghanea acknowledges the ongoing challenges and the need for continued efforts to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief both domestically and internationally. The conversation concludes with a suggestion to review the UK government's progress in this area in the future.

Ravi from the University of Chester, raised the question of whether multiple parallel legal systems or a uniform Civil Code is preferable, expressing concern about the impact on citizenship and social contracts.

John Mason MSP highlighted the challenges of balancing freedom of expression with protecting vulnerable groups from hate crimes, referencing the Hate Crime and Public Order Act in Scotland. Fraser Sutherland echoed this concern and emphasised the need to use international standards to guide the enforcement of hate crime legislation.

Richa (Hindu Community) raised concerns about the lack of consultation with the Hindu community regarding hate crime legislation and asked for guidance on how the community could address this issue constructively.

AOB/Further Meetings

Professor Ghanea suggested that the group could play a role in advocating for marginalised communities, sharing knowledge, and serving as a sounding board for consultations and emerging issues.

The participants discussed the potential role of the group in advocating for human rights both domestically and internationally, with a focus on specific cases and consultations.

Dr Maureen Sier expressed regret over technical issues with event registration and offered to share Professor Ghanea's reports with attendees who may have missed the discussion.

In closing, John Mason MSP thanked the participants for their contributions and encouraged them to share ideas for future meetings or follow-up actions.