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Guest Editorial

Archbishop's Kidnapping an End to Religious Tolerance? Eric Kuan

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(AINA) -- On January 17, 66-year old Archbishop Basile Georges Casmoussa of Mosul was [kidnapped](#) at gunpoint by suspected insurgents, in what is seen as another desperate move to disrupt the upcoming elections on January 30th. Later, however, he was [freed](#) apparently without paying any ransom.

The ease with which armed militants may even threaten the life of a high ranking non-Muslim religious leader illustrates the growing trend of religious intolerance in Iraq. Earlier this month, two Shi'ite Muslim aides to Shi'ite cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani were killed by suspected Sunni Muslim militants, who oppose the Shi'as.

This is neither the first nor the last incident involving attacks against the Assyrian (also known as Chaldean and Syriac) Christian minority in Iraq since the end of the Iraq War in 2003. In August 2004, six car bombs exploded and damaged churches in Baghdad and Mosul, killing at least 11 and wounding 50. The picture of an injured young Christian woman carrying a child seeking medical help was broadcast to the media, arousing feelings of sympathy for the plight of the Iraqi Christian minority, which comprises 6-8% of the Iraqi population. In October, another five churches were also bombed. In November, car bombs exploded outside St. George's Catholic Church and St. Matthew's Church in Baghdad, even as US and Iraqi ground forces battled Sunni militants fiercely at Fallujah. The November church bombings became at least the eighth reported attack by militants on Christian places of worship in Iraq.

The kidnapping of the archbishop and church bombings highlight once again the clear vulnerability of minority groups in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country like Iraq. What is more, the political and security situation in Iraq is in a state of unpredictable flux and violence. The Iraqi government was quick to blame Islamic militants for the church bombings, but if the perpetrators of the church bombings and the archbishop's kidnapping are not captured and prosecuted, it is likely that the Iraqi Christian minority may feel very threatened by violent elements in the country and place the blame on Allawi's Iraqi interim government and the US military forces. They may have no faith whatsoever in the Iraqi elections, since their interests will not be represented and ignored at best by the newly elected government, most likely to be dominated by a majority of Shi'as or Sunni Muslims.

There may be two negative consequences if the Christians feel that the new order in Iraq signaled the end of religious tolerance. One, there may be a mass exodus, as already 40,000 Christians have left the country for safer environments, thereby reducing further the amount of trade and revenue contributed by this community. Two, the Christians may form their militias to protect their communities. This in turn, may provoke more violence and attacks from armed Muslim factions.

In other countries attacks against places of worship have inspired acts of retaliatory violence, which threaten to factionalize the society. For example, in 1984, the Sikh Golden Temple Massacre led to the assassination of then Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi by her own Sikh bodyguards. And from 1999 to 2004, a number of church bombing incidents committed by extremist Islamic groups in Indonesia have also led to retaliatory violence by Indonesian Christians, resulting in revenge killings against Muslims.

The Iraqi church bombings are also a clear example of stressing the importance of religious tolerance by a firm and strong willed government, thus preventing religious factions from inciting mob furies, terrorist style bombings or massacres. Strict laws and just punishments must be imposed on those who would use the cloak of religion to justify violence against another religious denomination.

Singapore, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation in South East Asia, is a good example. Social and religious harmony forms the syllabus of national education taught to young children attending school. National policies also extend equal religious and legal rights guaranteeing freedom for religious practice regardless of race and creed.

There are 1.5-2 million Christians today in Iraq; although a minority amidst a total population of 25 million, it is still a significant minority group capable of effecting social or religious change. If the Iraqi government ignores or neglects the plight of the Assyrians, it is likely that this group will see that religious tolerance is dead, and the Christian question will evolve into a serious future issue.

Eric Koo Peng Kuan holds a Master of Science in Strategic Studies from the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies (IDSS) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He currently writes commentaries and analysis articles on international affairs, security issues and

terrorism for independent newspapers. He can be reached at pkkoo@hotmail.com.

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