

The USCIRF and the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill

Why in News?

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) said it was troubled by the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill in Lok Sabha.

What is the story behind?

- The [Citizenship \(Amendment\) Bill \(CAB\)](#) was passed in Lok Sabha recently despite widespread opposition.
- In response to this, the USCIRF has said that it was deeply troubled by the passage of the bill in Lok Sabha as it considers the religion as a criterion for citizenship.
- It recommended that if the CAB passes in both Houses of Parliament, the US government should consider sanctions against the Home Minister and other principal leadership.

What was USCIRF's statement about the CAB?

- The USCIRF issued a statement to raise serious concerns and eye sanctions recommendations in the aftermath of the passage of the CAB in Lok Sabha.
- It said the Bill enshrines a pathway to citizenship for immigrants that specifically exclude Muslims, setting a legal criterion for citizenship based on religion.
- It added that the Bill runs counter to India's rich history of secular pluralism and the Indian Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law regardless of faith.
- It also said something in conjunction with the ongoing National Register of Citizens (NRC) process in Assam and nationwide NRC that the Home Minister seeks to propose.
- It said that it fears that the Indian government is creating a religious test for Indian citizenship that would strip citizenship from many Muslims.

Who are the USCIRF?

- The USCIRF, a consultative body which advises the US Congress and the administration on issues pertaining to international religious freedom.
- It is an independent US federal government commission that was created by The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

- In practice, the USCIRF has little teeth in implementation, but acts as a conscience-keeper for the two branches in the US government - the legislature and the executive.
- It often takes extreme positions, used by civil society groups to put pressure on US Congress members and administration officials.

What is the IRFA?

- The IRFA of 1998 was passed by the 105th US Congress (1997-99) and signed into law by then President Bill Clinton on October 27, 1998.
- It is a statement of the US's concern over violations of religious freedoms overseas.

What does the USCIRF do?

- The USCIRF is mandated by US statute to monitor the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad (not in the US).
- It monitors this right using international standards and makes policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.
- USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and Congressional leaders of both political parties.
- While USCIRF is separate from the State Department, the Department's Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom is a non-voting ex officio Commissioner.
- Professional and non-partisan staffs support USCIRF's work.

What are the USCIRF's main responsibilities?

- To **issue an annual report** by May 1 of each year, assessing the US government's implementation of IRFA.
- It recommends countries that the Secretary of State should designate as "Countries of Particular Concern" for engaging in or tolerating "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom".
- It documents conditions in about 30 countries; reports on significant trends; and makes recommendations for US policy.
- To **engage Congress** by working with Congressional offices, advising on legislation, testifying at hearings, and holding briefings on religious freedom issues.
- To **meet regularly with Executive Branch officials** to share information, highlight situations of concern, and discuss USCIRF's recommendations for US policy.

How does USCIRF define "freedom of religion or belief abroad"?

- The Commission says that freedom of religion or belief is an important human right recognized in international law and treaties.
- This freedom is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought and conscience, and is intertwined with the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly.
- The promotion of this freedom is a necessary component of US foreign policy.

Has USCIRF raised issues relating to India in the past?

- **July 2008** - It had urged the US State Department to deny a tourist visa to then Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who had been invited to attend a conference in New Jersey.
- It had said that Modi was previously denied entrance to the US due to his role in riots that overtook the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002 in which many Muslims severely affected.
- **June 2019** - In response to mob lynching of Tabrez Ansari in Jharkhand in India, USCIRF had condemned the incident.
- It called on the Indian government to take concrete actions that will prevent this kind of violence and intimidation by an investigation of Ansari's murder as well as the local police's handling of the case.
- **August 2019** - USCIRF had issued a statement against the NRC in Assam and said that it creates a negative and potentially dangerous climate for the Muslim community in north-eastern India.

Source: The Indian Express