Benjamin Scheel
SGS 441 Tuesday and Thursday
Hertzke Essay #3

Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes always try and suppress the rest of society to protect their power and position. Religion is among one of the most suppressed by regimes along with freedom of speech and gather. The USCIRF has listed the countries that continue to restrict religious freedom as countries of concern that are China, Vietnam, North Korea, Burma, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and Nigeria as of 2011.

Almost all of these countries have totalitarian or authoritarian regimes that fall into a few subcategories. There are a couple differences between some of these governments. Some are Communist regimes that are essentially authoritarian. A couple of them are military dictatorships and others like Iran and Uzbekistan are semi-legitimate governments that openly persecute other religions. The rest are mostly countries in strife and conflict that are struggling for a central government.

The threat of religion to people in power is a real one, it is no coincidence. There are a couple of reasons for this. One is that religions have a transcendent power that falls upon its believers. Hertzke points out that, in the case of Christianity, all humans are equal in the eyes of the Lord. The threat then is that Christians will stop holding their "leader" so high and argue that they are merely a man and must answer to God and start questioning their authority. If people are worshipping a transcendent being then usually this discredits the ruling government. Essentially, religious followers start to put priorities over obedience to the government.

Another reason religion is threatening to some regimes is that it can be something that its citizens unite around to cause disruption in public order. In China, the Falun Gong movement had thousands of people on the streets protesting government policies. China is not big on protests and suppressed it as quickly as they could and thereafter banned Falun Gong and branded it a "cult." We saw some of this happen in Egypt as well in the overthrow of Mubarak. The Muslim brotherhood was very involved in organizing protests and putting pressure on Mubarak to resign.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, religion is used to actually hold onto power. The regime in Saudi Arabia actually created its on sect of Sunni, Wahabi, that holds a very strict moral code for its citizens to follow. This essentially leads to its citizens having fewer rights because this moral code is implemented into law, often times. Persecution of other religions is also an outcome of the state Wahabi religion. Any other form is seen as a threat to the uniformity of the people.

Uniformity is also very important to totalitarian regimes because it allows them to get a very collective approach to ruling. Freedom of religion would allow different types of ideals and morals that could be very difficult to rally people behind. Having a collectivist community, like what is promoted in North Korea, is advantageous to a totalitarian or authoritarian regime because it can exclude and alienate those that fall out of line. Freedom of religion tends to promote individualism, which could allow breaks in the delicate fabric of their governments.

Keeping people in a single community also allows for less conflict of ideals and desires. Controlling a united community is much easier than one that is in conflict. We can see this issue in Pakistan, it is struggling to keep control of their country due to religious violence. Having Christians and Muslims fighting it other in the name of transcendent ideals, there is little opportunity for resolution and tolerance. It is extremely difficult to control conflicting religions as many dictators have experienced.

Religion plays a large role in threatening totalitarian and authoritarian governments. The threats arise from the importance of religion to its believers, discrediting other authorities. Another threat is that it can stand as a rallying point for dissenters to protest or overthrow governments. And lastly, the threat to collectivity through either creating a rebellion community or creating two conflicting communities, both are challenging for an authoritarian or totalitarian government.