



US HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT – 2020: AN APPRAISAL AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Pledging to put human rights back at the center of American foreign policy, President Biden and his administration released its Human Rights Report – 2020 (HRR-2020) in March 2021 which paints a deteriorating picture for human rights across the world.

The US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken while unveiling the report said that the trend lines on human rights continue to move in the wrong direction and that some governments used the pandemic as a pretext to restrict rights and consolidate authoritarian rules.¹ He singled out Russia and China and accused them of genocide against the predominantly Muslim Uyghur's and other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang and the attacks on and the imprisonment of opposition politicians, anti-corruption activists, and independent journalists in places like Russia.²

The report has highlighted concerns about abuses in China, Iran, Russia, Myanmar, Belarus and other authoritarian nations. It called out China for committing what both the Trump and Biden administrations have characterized as "genocide" against Uighur Muslims and other minorities in

¹ Secretary Antony J. Blinken on Release of the 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices Press Briefing Room, *US Department of State*, March 30, 2021
<https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-release-of-the-2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/>

² Secretary Antony J. Blinken on Release of the 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices Press Briefing Room, *US Department of State*, March 30, 2021
<https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-release-of-the-2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/>

China's western Xinjiang region and has accused the Chinese government officials and the security services of human rights abuses with impunity.³

The report has chastised Pakistan and the lack of government's accountability that has fostered a culture of impunity among perpetrators, whether official or unofficial, and has criticized the government for rarely punishing its officials for human rights abuses.⁴

While the US firmly criticizes the treatment of Uighur Muslims by China in its HRR-2020, it has remained tight-lipped over the atrocities carried out by India in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) and the state sponsored human right abuses in its report and barely touches upon the marginalization of the minorities especially Muslims in the aftermath of the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA).

In a stark contrast to the US HRR-2020, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its report called out the Modi government not only against the discriminatory CAA but also over revoking the constitutional autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir and for deploying additional troops, detaining thousands, and cutting off phone and internet connections.⁵ It further highlighted the failure of police to intervene when BJP supporters engage in speech inciting violence or mob attacks but are quick to arrest critics of the government.⁶

The US itself is a victim of systemic racism both against the African-Americans and most recently the Asian-American community. Moreover, police shootings have also been on a rising trend in the US with the George Floyd incident as the most significant and the police killings of Daunte Wright, a 20-year-old, and Adam Toledo, an unarmed 13-year-old, more recently.⁷ The police killings of Black people have sparked massive and largely peaceful protests throughout the US, which in many instances were met with brutality by local and federal law enforcement agents.⁸

³ China Human Rights Report 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CHINA-2020-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>

⁴ Pakistan Human Rights Report 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PAKISTAN-2020-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>

⁵ "Shoot the Traitors," Discrimination Against Muslims under India's New Citizenship Policy, *Human Rights Watch*, April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/04/09/shoot-traitors/discrimination-against-muslims-under-indias-new-citizenship-policy>

⁶ "Shoot the Traitors," Discrimination Against Muslims under India's New Citizenship Policy, *Human Rights Watch*, April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/04/09/shoot-traitors/discrimination-against-muslims-under-indias-new-citizenship-policy>

⁷ Minyvonne Burke, "Daunte Wright, Adam Toledo protests turn violent in cities across US," *NBC News*, April 17, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/daunte-wright-adam-toledo-protests-turn-violent-cities-across-u-n1264396>

⁸ United States, Events of 2020, Country Chapter, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/united-states>



Source: *Washington Post Data Base*⁹

Moreover, incidents related to Corona virus discrimination have also been on a rise in the US. The Asian-Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON) in collaboration with Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) and San Francisco State University Asian-American Studies conducted a study for the period of March 19-25, 2020 which reviewed 673 reports of Corona virus discrimination.¹⁰ The following chart shows the major cases of discrimination and harassment reported during this period:

TYPE OF DISCRIMINATION	%	REASON FOR DISCRIMINATION	%
Barred from Establishment	2.4%	Ethnicity	65.5%
Barred from Transportation	1.0%	Face Mask	14.1%
Coughed/Spat Upon	2.7%	Food	4.8%
Online	2.2%	Gender	6.4%
Physical Assault	10.0%	Language	6.4%
Shunning	23.5%	Race	89.5%
Verbal Harassment	67.3%	Religion	1.2%
Workplace Discrimination	4.6%		
Other	7.4%		

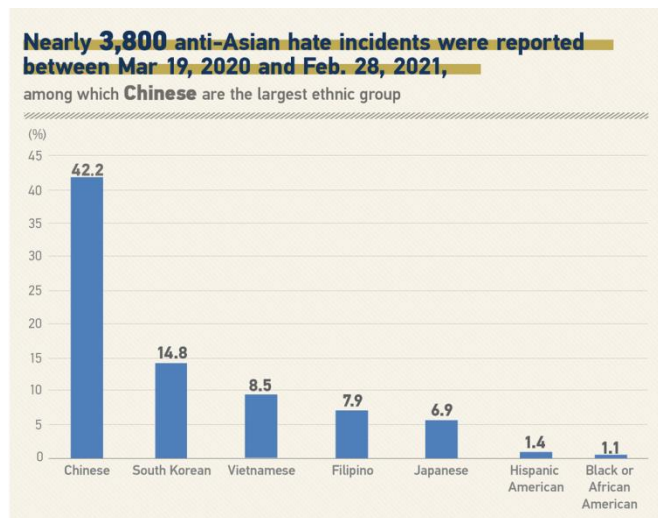
Source: *Report for A3PCON and CAA, San Francisco State University Asian American Studies*¹¹

In addition, major cities in the US have also witnessed surge of 145% in Asian-American hate crime in just 2020,¹² and at least 150 mass shootings in the first quarter of 2021.¹³

⁹ "991 People Have Been Shot and Killed by Police in the Past Year," *Fatal Force, Washington Post*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

¹⁰ Russell Jeung, "Incidents Of Corona virus Discrimination March 19-25, 2020," Report For A3pcon And CAA, *San Francisco State University Asian-American Studies*, March 25, 2020, http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/A3PCON_Public_Weekly_Report_3.pdf

¹¹ Russell Jeung, "Incidents Of Corona virus Discrimination March 19-25, 2020," Report For A3pcon And CAA, *San Francisco State University Asian-American Studies*, March 25, 2020, http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/A3PCON_Public_Weekly_Report_3.pdf



Source: *National Report, AAPI*¹⁴

The Human Rights Report – 2020 (HRR-2020) reflects US biases against countries based on its strategic interests and value. The bureaucratic gear of the State Department including the Secretary of State sees the world with a political and strategic objective and therefore, the political views and strategic interests of a given presidential administration are likely to exert at least a marginal influence on the behaviors and outputs of individual departmental agencies within the Executive Branch leading to variations in the reporting trends across different types of human rights.¹⁵

The US, through this report, has tried to profess its stance and fight for basic human principles and rule-based international order around the globe without any discrimination against any country but the fact remains different. US has not only failed to make use of its leverage as a global power to promote human rights abroad in an fair and unbiased manner, it has continued to undermine

¹² FACT SHEET: Anti-Asian Prejudice March 2021, Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, <https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/FACT%20SHEET-%20Anti-Asian%20Hate%202020%20rev%203.21.21.pdf>

¹³ Madeline Holcombe and Dakin Andone, "The US Has Reported at Least 50 Mass Shootings Since the Atlanta Spa Shootings," *CNN*, April 18, 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/18/us/mass-shootings-since-march-16/index.html> also refer to <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>

¹⁴ Stop AAPI Hate National Report 3.19.20 - 8.5.20, <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Report-National-200805.pdf>

¹⁵ Rebecca Cordell, K. Chad Clay, Christopher J. Fariss, Reed M. Wood & Thorin M. Wright, "Changing Standards or Political Whim? Evaluating Changes In The Content Of US State Department Human Rights Reports Following Presidential Transitions," *Journal of Human Rights*, Volume 19, 2020 - Issue 1: Special Issue on Quantitative Human Rights Measures, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14754835.2019.1671175?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

multilateral institutions and flouted international human rights and humanitarian law as it partnered with like-minded governments.¹⁶

The US needs to be mindful that its own human rights record is hardly any perfect itself. The way in which it paints its concern for human rights only reflects the function of the political preferences of a particular administration. Critics of the US State Department have often complained that it unfairly biases its human rights reports against countries that have opposing ideologies and favors countries that are strategically valuable to the US.¹⁷ Many a times, the US State Department has been accused of having strategically adjusting reporting standards for its annual reports produced even as early as the 1970s to mid 80s, with alleged bias in their content to make its allies and its foreign aid recipients appear more favorable.¹⁸

In a moment of self-awareness, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken acknowledged that the US itself has its own challenges to deal with and admitted that there was a lot of work to do at home. However, the question remains whether this realization alone is enough? While highlighting human rights issues, violence and abuse is an important element and it must be done so without any bias and discrimination. Washington has little right to selectively criticize and reprimand others when it has its own challenges to deal with as well as the need to address profound inequities including systemic racism, and profiling and international strategic biasness.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, United States - 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/united-states>

¹⁷ Nancy Qian and David Yanagizawa, "The Strategic Determinants of U.S. Human Rights Reporting: Evidence from the Cold War," *Journal of the European Economic Association*, Vol. 7, No. 2/3, Proceedings of the Twenty-Third Annual Congress of the European Economic Association, April - May, 2009, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40282762?seq=1>

¹⁸ Peter Haschke & Daniel Arnon, "What bias? Changing Standards, Information Effects, And Human Rights Measurement," *Journal of Human Rights*, Volume 19, 2020 - Issue 1: Special Issue on Quantitative Human Rights Measures, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14754835.2019.1671179?scroll=top&needAccess=true>