

## Ch. 2: Finding Religion in Current Electoral Assessments

Various frameworks, including those related to the threat of election violence, guide electoral assessments that governmental and non-governmental organizations use to plan programmatic engagements. These include the U.S. Government's Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework and more specific frameworks like the National Democratic Institute's Votes without Violence Assessment Framework, which highlights risks of violence against women in elections, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) *Violence Against Women in Elections* assessments.<sup>9</sup>

To better understand how the field currently analyzes religion in electoral assessments and election observation missions (EOMs), we conducted a meta-analysis of over a dozen publicly available evaluations and EOMs from diverse organizations in various countries and regions. While we do not claim that these represent a random sample of such assessments, trends emerge regarding how religion does (and does not) feature in their analyses.

Current electoral assessment frameworks primarily evaluate various factors related to electoral integrity, drawing on frameworks developed by good governance organizations and scholars.<sup>10</sup> IFES, for example, maintains a comprehensive practitioner Electoral Integrity Assessment methodology that maps vulnerabilities across 18 areas of the election process and prioritizes recommendations for reform. It has been implemented in several countries, including Mali.<sup>11</sup> Most of these assessments include attention to a country's election law, voter registration and education, campaign finance, electoral planning, and implementation, prospects for peace and security surrounding the election, and an evaluation of the media environment, which often includes specific attention to hate speech. Most electoral assessments pay attention to the participation status of women and minorities, but religious institutions and actors are usually mentioned peripherally, if at all. This is how religion generally appears in these assessments: lurking below the surface, alluded to but not named.

When religion does show up in the reviewed pre-electoral assessments or EOMs, it has appeared as follows:

- **Religion as demographics.** Assessment reports and EOMs regularly provide statistics about a country's religious demographics, often focusing on the number of religious minorities.
- **Religion as a source of exclusion.** Assessment reports and EOMs sometimes note that a country limits the political participation of religious minorities or women, supposedly on religious grounds.
- **Religion as a tool for political mobilization.** Assessment reports and EOMs sometimes highlight political parties organized on religious lines or candidates who utilize religious campaign rhetoric, including mobilizing based on religious identity and, at times, delivering policy priorities of religious communities.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/187786.pdf>; <https://www.ndi.org/votes-without-violence-guide>; <https://www.ifes.org/publications/violence-against-women-elections-framework>

<sup>10</sup> For instance, through the work of Pippa Norris and associated scholars. See, for example, Norris, Pippa. *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*. 2014. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup> IFES. "Mali Electoral Integrity Assessment" 2023. March 27, 2023. <https://www.ifes.org/publications/mali-electoral-integrity-assessment>

- **Religion as a source of identity cleavage (including political violence).** Assessment reports and EOMs regularly reference religion as an identity category involved in social cleavage, often alongside other features such as race, ethnicity, or language. Most pre-electoral assessments include a section on a country's peace and security dynamics, and they often refer to existing tensions based on differing religious identities. Here, religion may also show up in the previous efforts of interfaith and intercommunal organizations to promote peace across identity boundaries.

The question, then, is: If religion only appears in these ways, is our current analysis enough for practitioners and interested stakeholders to properly assess and address how religion may or may not play a role in an election cycle? Neglecting to broaden and deepen our analysis of religion in relevant pre-electoral assessments and EOMs may cause practitioners to overlook potential opportunities to promote electoral integrity. In Kenya, for example, the Inter-religious Council, the Council of Bishops, and the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya have performed a vital mediation role to promote peace and reconciliation and resolve past election-related grievances. Additionally, assessments may miss influential but non-clerical religious leaders like the Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria and the Women Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria urging Nigerians to vote for candidates peacefully and fairly.<sup>12</sup>

Limited attention to religion in assessment also makes it challenging to address another possibility: contexts where observers assume that religion is a salient political force in the electoral cycle but where its influence may, in fact, be limited. This is in keeping with Mandaville's sage guidance to "right-size" religion in diplomatic efforts moving beyond the assumption that politics "could be accurately characterized as either wholly *religious* or *irreligious* in nature."<sup>13</sup> We can see this in the case of Lebanon, where one might believe that religion and national religious actors are among the defining forces in the electoral cycle, given the sectarian nature of many political parties, but where experts contend that national-level religious elites often have limited ability to influence other "secular" elites within their sectarian communities. Right-sizing religion's importance, for good or ill, first requires a sophisticated assessment that matches expertise brought to other security, economic, or cultural topics.

In sum, while religion appears on the margins of existing assessments, significant room exists to deepen its treatment. Updating existing approaches is a crucial first step in responding to religion's role in the electoral cycle.

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<sup>12</sup> "WOWICAN and FOMWAN Advocate for a Peaceful Election." 2022. Campus Reporter. July 16, 2022.

<https://campusreporter.ng/wowican-and-fomwan-advocate-for-peaceful-election/>

<sup>13</sup> Mandaville, Peter. 2021 "Right-Sizing Religion and Religious Engagement in Diplomacy and Development." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19, (sup1): 92–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1983345>