Ch. 4: Opportunities and Considerations for Engagement

After assessing the religious dynamics in a particular case, the electoral support community may have an interest in developing an engagement or intervention strategy. While there has been little systematic research on religious engagement in the electoral cycle, religious actors are, in practice, already involved in a wide variety of initiatives. Below we present illustrative examples drawn from a variety of regional settings and diverse stages of the electoral cycle. While we do not attempt to set out a systematic list of best practices or argue that engagement is always appropriate, there is ample evidence of diverse paths of engagement across the election cycle.

In all phases of the electoral cycle, programmatic planning should be attentive to maintaining and, where possible, strengthening ties across religious and social cleavages. Evidence points to early confidence-building measures between religious and secular activists in Tunisia, for instance, as essential to stabilizing that country's Arab Spring transition.[26] As noted above, such cleavages may exist within, as well as between, religious traditions. Maintaining ties by involving diverse religious actors in pre-election planning, such as diverse networks like Sierra Leone's Inter-Religious Council, may be particularly effective.

4.1. Pre-election Period

In the earliest stages, religion may contribute crucial information to pre-electoral assessments. Religious actors can serve as valuable information sources in the data collection process. Furthermore, because religious infrastructure is frequently strong in rural and impoverished communities, religious institutions may offer uniquely valuable data in the assessment process. In some cases—notably a comprehensive assessment of peace and governance conducted by Catholic Relief Services for the Catholic Bishops Conference of Liberia—religious organizations may actually be the ones to carry out the assessment.[27] In other cases, multinational organizations may collaborate with local religious networks for similar assessments—for example, International IDEA's collaboration with the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy on the *State of Local Democracy in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (SoLD ARMM)* report from 2013.[28] Partnerships may also involve religiously-affiliated CSOs and scholars focused on the sources of high-quality governance, as in studies of "vote-buying" in the Philippines.[29]

As the pre-election period moves beyond assessment to programmatic response, religious engagement can be loosely grouped into two categories. In the first category, religious actors play a part in *high-level planning* in the early stages of an electoral cycle. In the second, religious institutions play a role in *grassroots outreach* to engage and mobilize citizens.

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[26] Stepan, Alfred. 2012. "Tunisia's Transition and the Twin Tolerations," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 2. https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/tunisias-transition-and-the-twin-tolerations/

[27] "State of Peace, Reconciliation and Conflict in Liberia." 2016. Catholic Relief Services. December 20, 2016. https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/state-peace-reconciliation-and-conflict-liberia

[28] Co, Edna, Ramon Fernan, Maria Faina, L. Diola, et al. n.d. "State of Local Democracy in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (SoLD ARMM)." https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/state-of-local-democracy-autonomous-region-muslim-mindanao.pdf

[29] https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/combating-vote-selling-philippines

At a high level, religious actors are frequently involved in mediation efforts between political factions, particularly before potentially divisive elections. Religious actors have been involved in a number of mediation efforts between incumbents and opposition in Latin America in the past quarter century.[30] Leaders organized as the Interfaith Peace Platform in the Central Africa Republic have been central to elite mediation efforts before that country's recent elections, including attracting a visit from Pope Francis in 2014. The *Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo*, which represents the official hierarchy of the Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo, was central to a series of mediation efforts between the political opposition and President Joseph Kabila in the run-up to elections that eventually took place in late 2018. Religious elites may also lend credibility to technical aspects of election preparation. The Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), a religious network of domestic election observers in the Philippines, served as an observer to the contentious procurement process for the first automated vote-counting machines in the country.[31]

Religious concerns may also be reflected in candidate codes of conduct—for instance, India's Model Code of Conduct restricting the use of caste or religion during an election campaign. Religious actors may serve as conveners of candidate fora designed to promote peaceful conduct and disseminate information about candidates. Ghana's National Peace Council succeeded in gathering all presidential candidates to publicly commit to peaceful elections in 2016 amid concerns over potential electoral violence.[32] Malawi's 2014 Lilongwe Peace Declaration brought a similar approach.[33] In the Philippines, the evangelical VoteNet initiative brought presidential candidates together for a nationally televised candidate forum in 2010, focused on candidate character and integrity.

In addition to these elite engagements, religious institutions are common contributors to grassroots outreach and mobilization in the pre-election period. Various forms of voter and civic education are the most common examples of this engagement. For instance, citizenship trainings developed by *Simbahang Lingkod ng Bayan,* the social action arm of the Jesuit community in the Philippines, were then deployed throughout the country through congregations. Some of this education and outreach may be fairly technical in nature. For instance, religious networks were crucial in disseminating the new standards as the Philippines required new biometric information for voter registration. In Timor-Leste, religious institutions played an important role in identity verification when registration records were scarce in the post-conflict environment. Similarly, the international Sant'Egidio religious community has worked closely with several governments in sub-Saharan Africa on improving birth registration, a topic relevant to voter registration.

At the same time, civic education by religious institutions regularly attempts not only to convey technical information but also to draw on religious values to motivate action. PPCRV voter education manuals for the 2016 Philippine election provided technical information about the mechanics of elections alongside primers in Catholic social teaching and prayers for clean elections. Elections experts may appear alongside clergy at congregation-based training

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[30] Betances, Emelio. 2004. "The Catholic Church and Political Mediation in the Dominican Republic: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Church and State* 46 (2): 341–64. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/46.2.341

[31] It is worth noting that the involvement of religious elites is no guarantee of avoiding controversy. The procurement of automated count machines from Smartmatic was highly controversial, including among religious elites in the Philippines, with some Catholic bishops sharply critical of the PPCRV's endorsement of the EMB's decision.

[32] https://www.peacecouncil.gov.gh/storage/2019/09/National-Peace-Council-Evaluation-Report-pub-October-2017.pdf

[33] "Taking a Stand Against Electoral Violence in Malawi." 2014. https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MW_140510_LilongwePeaceDeclaration.pdf

events, with religious authorities providing credible moral messengers while civil society representatives provide technical details on election procedures. While religious actors are free to use their own religious traditions and values in civic education, it is important that the electoral support community consider all religious communities in engagements and that it incorporates principles of diversity and equity into official materials.

Much of this voter education occurs via physical religious infrastructure, but religious institutions may also have unique access to various forms of media. Religious radio networks in South Sudan have proven essential in providing information in local languages regarding elections to dispersed populations in a context of low state capacity. And even mainstream, non-religious media may enthusiastically give airtime to religious campaigners in contexts of highly popular religiosity.

One issue that combines technical voter education with moral messaging is combatting corruption and vote-buying in the period leading up to elections. While religious actors are certainly not immune to charges of corruption, there are numerous examples of religious networks mobilizing as part of anti-corruption campaigns around election season. The PPCRV's 2016 One Good Vote education campaign focused heavily on resisting vote-buying in the Philippines, including proposals to have "roving public address systems" condemn vote-buying around the parish community in the weeks leading to the election. While the March 12 Movement for good governance in Sri Lanka was not explicitly religious, it involved significant involvement from faith leaders and centered its campaign on combatting bribery and corruption. This area also illustrates the need for added M&E in this area, discussed below. There is at least some evidence that certain anti-vote buying strategies advocated by Filipino religious leaders are of questionable effect.[34]

Ensuring inclusive participation in elections is among the enduring challenges in the pre-election period. Religion may sometimes be a source of exclusion, but several examples highlight creative responses from the electoral support community that can involve religious actors in ameliorating these challenges. Eliminating Yemen's policy requiring retaining photographs of veiled women correlated to more than doubling the female registration rate in the country.[35] In the Philippines, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) worked closely with religious networks to reduce obstacles faced by persons with disabilities and Indigenous communities, who have longstanding relationships with religious charitable networks in the country. IFES has worked with the Electoral Commission of Nepal to provide voter education to hundreds of thousands of Dalits in the country, working closely with community leaders.[36] And the National Democratic Institute has made an effort to "mainstream LGBT inclusion" by integrating LGBT groups in broader good governance coalitions in Turkey that include religious conservatives.[37]

We close this section by mentioning a final issue of emerging importance to the electoral support community: the use of disinformation and hate speech during elections, particularly online in the campaign period. Disinformation and violent social media messages have been deployed in the campaign period in many places, including Mexico, Kenya, and Myanmar, with the latter tied to religion and having severe consequences for the Rohingya minority in the country. Religion may sometimes play a part in the spread of online disinformation. For example, Armaly, Buckley, and Enders

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[34] Hicken, Allen, Stephen Leider, Nico Ravanilla, and Dean Yang. 2018. "Temptation in Vote-Selling: Evidence from a Field Experiment in the Philippines." *Journal of Development Economics* 131 (March): 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2017.10.012.\
[35] "Identification of Voters Wearing a Veil —." N.d. https://aceproject.org/electoral-advice/archive/questions/replies/419301685
[36] https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_brochure_underrepresented_populations_0.pdf
[37] "How Does LGBT Inclusion Fit within NDI's Mission?" n.d. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Civic_Update_Jan_2014.pdf

(2022) document how links between conspiratorial information sources and white Christian nationalism in the United States built support for the attacks on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.[38] Scholars have also conducted extensive recent research tying religion to online disinformation connected to the COVID-19 pandemic—for instance, the work of Alimardani and Elswah (2020) in the Middle East.[39] Electoral organizations focusing on disinformation would be wise to integrate religion into their assessments of the origins and effects of that information.

As the electoral support community develops non-regulatory responses to online disinformation in collaboration with state and non-state actors, some illustrative efforts suggest that there is room for strategic engagement with religious leaders.[40] For example, Haque et al. (2020) find that collaborating with religious leaders in Bangladesh could prove an effective strategy in combatting misinformation that has led to sectarian election violence in that country.[41] Religious authorities launched a "Fake News, Religion and Politics" program in Brazil through nationwide religious communication networks focused on democracy and election verification.[42] In the Philippines, religious leaders joined with media, civil society, and business leaders to launch #FactsFirstPH before the country's 2022 polls.[43]

4.2. Election Period

Religious institutions' most visible involvement in the electoral cycle occurs during the election period, specifically on Election Day itself—especially via the involvement of religious networks in domestic citizen monitoring. The Philippines' ground-breaking National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) has been closely tied to religious actors since its inception in the mid-1980s, recruiting from Christian clergy as well as networks of Muslim elites, particularly in portions of the island of Mindanao. These days, a second domestic citizen monitoring group, the PPCRV, more uniquely tied to the country's Roman Catholic majority, regularly mobilizes hundreds of thousands of monitors across the country. This exemplifies a much broader set of cases that see similar cooperation between domestic observers and religious networks—*Observatorio da Igreja Para Os Assuntos Socials* (Timor-Leste), *Caritas* (Papua New Guinea), Malawi Electoral Support Network (Malawi), and others. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace has also done significant election-related work in Southern Africa, including Zimbabwe. In the lead-up to the 2022 national elections, the Council of Churches of Papua New Guinea, in collaboration with the Papua New Guinea Election Commission and IFES, developed a civic education video that was distributed nationwide, urging leaders and voters to uphold the Constitution, guard the integrity of elections, address violence against women and girls, and participate in the elections.[44]

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[38] Armaly, Miles T., David T. Buckley, and Adam M. Enders. 2022. "Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks*." Political Behavior* 44 (2): 1-24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09758-y
[39] Alimardani, Mahsa, and Mona Elswah. 2020. "Online Temptations: COVID-19 and Religious Misinformation in the MENA Region." *Social Media+ Society* 6 (3): 205630512094825. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948251
[40] IFES. "Countering Hate Speech in Elections: Strategies for Electoral Management Bodies." 2023. May 18, 2023. https://www.ifes.org/publications/countering-hate-speech-elections-strategies-electoral-management-bodies
[41] Haque, Md Mahfuzul, Mohammad Yousuf, Ahmed Shatil Alam, Pratyasha Saha, Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, and Naeemul Hassan. 2020. "Combating Misinformation in Bangladesh: Roles and Responsibilities as Perceived by Journalists, Fact-Checkers, and Users." *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4, (CSCW2): 1-32. https://doi.org/10.1145/3415201
[42] Fides, Agenzia. n.d. "AMERICA/BRAZIL - 'Fake News, Religion and Politics': Online Course to Combat Disinformation and Strengthen the Commitment to Truth - Agenzia Fides." www.fides.org. http://www.fides.org/en/news/72563-AMERICA_BRAZIL_Fake_news_religion_and_politics_online_course_to_combat_disinformation_and_strengthen_the_commitment_to_truth
[43] See, for example, https://factsfirst.ph/members#list-of-orgs
[44] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vv3otefzJ-4

Religion's importance in the election period may show not only through volunteer recruitment for domestic observation but also in the infrastructure for voting verification. The national headquarters for NAMFREL's crucial 1986 quick count was at De La Salle University, a prominent Catholic higher education institution. Religious networks there have also been closely tied to the domestic legal network that observes the canvassing stage of the vote count—the Legal Network for Truthful Elections—with recruitment taking place in part through Catholic law schools and the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines' network of social action centers. In some settings, from Indonesia to the United States, churches, mosques, and other houses of worship have been used as polling places. While common, this pattern is not universally recommended as a best practice. Assessment could indicate that the nature of religious divisions in a country would mean that turning to houses of worship for election infrastructure could result in exclusion.

In contentious elections, these domestic observers and verification processes may play an important part in the perceived legitimacy of results. NAMFREL's work famously led the Philippines' Catholic bishops to denounce Ferdinand Marcos's 1986 snap election results when the domestic observers' count could not verify government reporting. This can, of course, be contentious work. The Democratic Republic of Congo's EMB, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante, clashed with the Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo (the country's Catholic bishops) when the bishops questioned the results of the 2019 election based on its network of 40,000 domestic observers.

While the electoral support community works for free and fair elections, the threat of election violence remains real in various settings. As discussed in the next section, electoral competition may inflame sectarian tensions, and violence may occur along religious lines. While completely addressing the sources of sectarian violence requires longer-term attention, the electoral support community has become increasingly well-versed in the importance of early warning and response in limiting potential violence during the election period.

Religious networks are frequently involved in these monitoring efforts. They can be especially useful where they blend grassroots infrastructure with national connectivity, as in Ghana's National Peace Council and the Chisankho 2019 digital platform in Malawi. Early warning and response programs can draw on religious actors for effective grassroots networks, training of monitors in the pre-election period, monitoring on Election Day itself, and community-based intervention when risks of violence increase significantly. And, at the intersection of violence and hate speech, the leadership of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, brought a "big boost" to the fight against online hate speech in advance of the 2018–19 elections with a recommendation that such activity "be considered a disgraceful act that must be deemed *haram* under all circumstances."[45]

Finally, in addition to monitoring potential election violence, religious networks may mediate grassroots conflicts related to election results. Religious actors' involvement in forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) at various levels of government may be especially important in contexts where judiciaries are weak or overburdened and official electoral dispute resolution mechanisms unlikely to deliver credible or timely responses that can limit violence. Grassroots conflict management panels in Kenya, developed in partnership with the Electoral Institute for Sustainable

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[45] The Jakarta Post Editorial. November 28, 2017. http://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2017/11/28/editorial-countering-hate-speech.html

Democracy in Africa, drew on widely respected personalities at the regional and national levels, including many religious leaders, to monitor and then mitigate electoral conflict in the country after the violence of 2007.[46] ADR is likely to be particularly useful to practitioners in contexts where pre-existing traditions of mediation exist in local cultures.

4.3. Post-election Period

After votes have been counted and verified, the post-election period offers opportunities to evaluate the success of the electoral cycle to that point and offer reforms moving forward. Much of this work may occur within the EMB or via the legislature if legal reform is needed. However, religious actors can have a part to play at this stage of the cycle as well, largely building on their work in earlier stages of the process.

If religious networks in a given context are heavily involved in voter education and domestic monitoring, they are likely sources for post-election reports that evaluate the election cycle. In the Philippines, the PPCRV's 2016 post-election report, for instance, documented a range of successes and obstacles in the election period, including incidents of election violence, technical challenges with vote counting machines, and limitations placed on poll observers. While the ultimate responsibility for reform rests with the appropriate branch of government and/or the EMB, religious networks can be useful contributors to this type of post-election evaluation.

The post-election period may also be an important time to evaluate lessons learned or obstacles to equal access in the country and adopt reforms needed to increase access in the future. Post-election lessons-learned exercises, often organized by the EMB, could involve input from relevant religious actors and networks. Similarly, domestic monitoring groups may include particular attention to obstacles faced by persons with disabilities, older voters, or Indigenous persons. These sectors may interact with religious charitable networks, thus increasing the relevance of religious engagement in planning for future improvements to the registration and voting process.

4.4. Monitoring and Evaluation

Once engagements and interventions are implemented, the natural question is how well those measures work. Various forms of M&E are now standard practice in the electoral support community. However, in our assessment, M&E related explicitly to religious engagement lags behind other areas in this field. We believe that robust evaluation is essential to demonstrating the value added by religious engagement and avoiding potential missteps in programmatic engagement. As an initial step in addressing the existing shortfall, we propose three steps.

First, secular organizations in the electoral support community should engage in extended, early conversations with potential religious partners about assessment standards and processes. This early M&E planning may help to ensure the high-quality data needed for a successful evaluation. Ruark et al. (2019), for instance, find that M&E related to faith-based health programs in rural settings in Kenya struggled: "Religious leaders were often unable to use electronic reporting tools designed for mobile phones (via Internet or SMS) because they lacked funds to purchase

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[46] EISA. "Past Offices." n.d. https://www.eisa.org.za/kenconflict.php

data for their phones and also required training in the use of these electronic tools."[47] Moreover, practitioners in the development world highlight the distinct standards for programmatic effectiveness that religious actors may adopt. Check et al. (2020) write about efforts to develop "Christ-centered Monitoring and Evaluation" among some Christian development organizations.[48] As Seiple et al. (2021) note, "Whatever one's opinion of the theology, clearly [this] is a separate filter for monitoring and evaluation not found in traditional social science."[49]

Second, M&E experts in the electoral support community may benefit from building relationships with experts in religion and development assessment, which has expanded significantly in the past two decades. Faith-based organizations like the Accord Network and more secular convenors like the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities have built a comparatively deep bench of expertise in M&E related to religion's involvement in development challenges like public health and disaster response. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has hosted "evidence summits" on religion and development several times in recent years, which contain extended attention to M&E and religion but see relatively limited involvement from the electoral support community.[50]

Third, while comparatively little programmatic M&E has taken place related to religion and election integrity, recent academic research can offer guidance as electoral organizations move forward in this area. For example, McClendon and Riedl (2015) use an experimental research design to demonstrate the effects of sermon content on civic participation in Kenya.[51] Audette et al. (2020) demonstrate links between religious affiliation and civic participation across Latin America.[52] These results suggest some empirical grounding to the expectation that forms of religion may encourage the type of political participation that the electoral support community promotes.

However, other recent research suggests the need to question assumptions about how religious messages may impact citizens. In a field experiment, Cheeseman and Peiffer (2021) found that exposure to religious anti-bribery campaigns increased some Nigerians' willingness to pay a bribe.[53] Sperber et al. (2022) found that religious messages stressing a need to work for the common good have little effect on civic behavior, although those cuing self-efficacy did.[54] These and other research findings suggest that the electoral support community should stay abreast of breaking scholarship, perhaps even convening a community of research practice, to ensure that religion-related interventions reflect rapidly developing research in this area.

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[47] Ruark, Allison, Jane Kishoyian, Mona Bormet, and Douglas Huber. 2019. "Increasing Family Planning Access in Kenya through Engagement of Faith-Based Health Facilities, Religious Leaders, and Community Health Volunteers." *Global Health: Science and Practice* 7 (3): 478-90. https://doi.org/10.9745/GHSP-D-19-00107

[48] Check, Kristen, Rodney Green, and Subodh Kumar. 2020. "Toward Laying the Foundation for Christ-Centered Monitoring & Evaluation." *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy: The Journal of the Accord Network* 1 (2): 61–69. https://crdajournal.org/index.php/crda/article/view/417

[49] Seiple, Chris, Katherine Marshall, Hugo Slim, and Sudipta Roy. 2021. "Strategic Religious Engagement in International Development: Building a Basic Baseline." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs 19 (sub1):* 1-11: Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1983360

[50] See, for example, the agenda for the 2022 Evidence Summit at https://events.zoom.us/ev/AijLv7e0ofHqMQgk3P4rlg6SlFH-pufzBfVcHF4DupRy0btGpyyI~AggLXsr32QYFjq8BlYLZ5I06Dg

[51] McClendon, Gwyneth, and Rachel Beatty Riedl. "Religion as a Stimulant of Political Participation: Experimental Evidence from Nairobi, Kenya." *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 4 (2015): 1045-57.

[52] Audette, Andre P., Mark Brockway, and Rodrigo Castro Cornejo. 2020. "Religious Engagement, Civic Skills, and Political Participation in Latin America." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59 (1). March 1, 2020: 101–18. https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12642

[53] Cheeseman, Nic, and Caryn Peiffer. 2021. "The Curse of Good Intentions: Why Anticorruption Messaging Can Encourage Bribery." American Political Science Review 116, no. 3 (2022): 1081-95. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055421001398

[54] Sperber, Elizabeth, O'Brien Kaaba, and Gwyneth McClendon. 2022. "Increasing Youth Political Engagement with Efficacy Not Obligation: Evidence from a Workshop-Based Experiment in Zambia." *Political Behavior* 44, (4) (2022/12/01 2022): 1933-58. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09794-2

The Question of Religious "Neutrality"

Practitioner consultations that grounded this report included debate over the importance of religious actors being seen as neutral or impartial among political candidates or parties. What degree of genuine and perceived neutrality do religious actors need to serve as effective partners in election planning, particularly in multi-religious societies?

Election stakeholders, especially those from countries that place legal limits on religious groups campaigning or endorsing candidates for office, might assume that neutrality from religious leaders *should* be expected as a condition of engagement. However, neutrality is neither necessary nor sufficient to play some role in strengthening electoral institutions. Religious leaders may speak out in favor of civil liberties and electoral transparency in ways that bring them into conflict with political incumbents but contribute to electoral integrity, as with Senegal's tumultuous 2012 election. Certain clerics may issue statements that seem to question the suitability of a particular candidate, as was the case with the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines in the run-up to President Rodrigo Duterte's election in 2016,[55] while lay networks in the same country continue to work impartially to carry out voter education.

As stated in this report's assessment section, as a first step, it is essential that the electoral support community assess the relationships between religious and political actors as a precursor to launching any potential engagement. We suspect that the importance of neutrality may vary significantly depending on both the political context and the goals of those considering an engagement. There may be particular goals—for instance, mediating with hardline politicians—that are most likely met by religious actors who are not entirely neutral. Other functions— e.g., serving on an EMB or organizing large-scale citizen election monitoring—require much more impartiality from religious actors to ensure public credibility. It may be especially problematic, for example, when an individual cleric *serving on the EMB* endorses a candidate, as happened before Timor-Leste's 2007 election.[56]

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[55] MIDASPLAY. n.d. "Midasplay by 7midas - Slot Online Gacor #1 Pasti Bayar." http://www.cbcpnews.com/cbcpnews/?p=76681
[56] "Preview of the 2007 East Timor Presidential Elections | Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability." 2007. Nautilus.org. April 5, 2007. https://nautilus.org/apsnet/preview-of-the-2007-east-timor-presidential-elections/

Considering Limits and Unintended Consequences

While there are significant opportunities for engagement between the electoral support community and religious organizations, it is also important to consider potential sources of (perhaps unintended) adverse outcomes from engagement. Three stand out for consideration: the role of the election planning community in the *content* of religious engagements, the potential for engagement to alter local religious dynamics in undesirable ways, and religious leaders' hesitation in engaging in election-related work.

First, should the electoral support community try to influence which religious messages partner organizations deploy? What happens if the norms that motivate religious partners seem problematic to partners in the election planning community? How should donors respond, for example, if a religiously inspired CSO develops candidate evaluation materials that promote honesty but also favor candidates who have faith in God? To what extent should the electoral support community attempt input into the content of the messages delivered in those communities?

A second area for caution is the possibility that engaging religious actors could alter local religious dynamics in ways that undermine engagement goals. Particularly if engagement involves the commitment of significant donor resources to religious charities or non-profits, partnerships could stoke rivalry among religious actors in society. It is also possible that partnerships with donors—particularly international groups—may delegitimize local religious partners or open them to repression from incumbent political powers.

Third, religious actors may hesitate to respond even if members of the electoral support community propose engagements. This could be because they understand that such initiatives could undermine their local moral authority. Local religious institutions may also find the processes of writing proposals and managing grants unfamiliar or burdensome. And some religious actors may simply choose not to prioritize work to strengthen electoral integrity due to other organizational priorities or even disillusionment with the democratic process.

Organizations considering engagements should be aware of these challenges, incorporating risk calculations into decisions about appropriate engagement strategy in a given electoral environment. Strong relationships with religious actors, formed early in the election cycle, can help all involved to understand priorities and sensitivities. We concur with a recent United States Institute of Peace report's conclusion: "In most cases, governments have no standing in the eyes of many believers to make pronouncements in matters of religion."[57] The electoral support community should exercise a minimal role in dictating the content of local messages beyond assuring that they align with the general goals of promoting electoral integrity.

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[57] Mandaville, Peter, and Melissa Nozell. "Engaging Religion and Religious Actors in Countering Violent Extremism." 2017. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace. https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/08/engaging-religion-and-religious-actors-countering-violent-extremism